

The Fullness Of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] And would you, if you've got a Bible in front of you, turn to Colossians chapter 2 and we're going to be reading from verse 6 down to verse 15. Colossians chapter 2 verses 6 to 15 and let me just pray once more on us for God's help as we read. Lord please, by your Holy Spirit now as we read your word would you speak to us Lord we pray that you would show us the Lord Jesus not merely in word as it were not merely in our intellects but that you by your Holy Spirit might cause this word to fall on soft soil good soil in our hearts take the scales from our eyes we pray, unstop our ears soften our hearts and loosen our limbs that we might know you that we might follow you and that upon hearing your word we may be those who are truly wise and who in love for Christ obey all that you tell us will be merciful now as we hear your voice in

Jesus name. Amen. So Colossians chapter 2 at beginning to read at verse 6 therefore as you received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in Him rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ for in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have been filled in Him who is the head of all rule and authority in Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ having been buried with Him in baptism in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised Him from the dead and you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh God made alive together with Him having forgiven us all our trespasses by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands this he set aside nailing it to the cross he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphant over them in Him. Amen this is God's word. Now I want to begin as we consider this together to ask you a little question just to think for a moment as you sit there have you ever been on a long walk? I don't just mean a short wander or even an hour or two I mean a very long walk a journey where actually you've got an awfully long way to go such that the directions you take are going to make all the difference to you. I remember the tail end of my year out between school and university myself and two friends were going to walk a section of the Pyrenean way we were going to walk from the middle of the

Pyrenees down to the Spanish Mediterranean coast it would have been about a 12-day walk. I say it would have been because after the initial first steep climb we got to our first youth hostel and I slipped and tripped and fell and twisted my knee and had to be lifted down off the mountain and come home in a certain amount of shame I couldn't do the the long hike with my mates. The bonus was I was able to visit the Netherlands and my wife and I are here today so there we are the Lord knew exactly what he was doing but they had a very long walk ahead of them a 12-day trek such that if they'd gone wrong if they'd taken a wrong direction if they had set off on the the wrong compass bearing right at the beginning they wouldn't ever have arrived at their destination I wonder if you have been in that sort of situation whether you have in in life or not actually we could say in all seriousness that each of us today is on a long walk a long walk of life particularly the the long walk of the Christian life you'll have noticed as I read in chapter 2 verse 6 that Paul describes the Christian life as a walk and he says to the Colossians as you received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him one writer in the States has referred to the Christian life as a long obedience in the same direction and many of us even though we're all at different ages and stages in the room we'll be able to testify to that but sometimes life just feels like putting one step in front of the other and often it can wonder can feel like we don't know where we're headed the reason we're looking at this section today is because here is Paul giving to this young church a group of Christians in

Colossia kind of crossroad area of the ancient Near East he's giving them their direction of travel he's giving them their compass bearing he's giving them their orientation by which they're going to keep on going in the Christian life to the very end you see there are lots of different people in Colossia at this time saying to them in different ears look hi for this way follow Jesus over here or you made a great start with Christ but now here's how you're going to get on in maturity and find fullness and satisfaction and Paul says no no you do it by focusing on Christ as you received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving that little verse is almost a summary of the Apostle Paul's whole ministry you could cast your eye just across the page to chapter 1 and verse 28 and he describes the work of the Apostle as proclaiming Christ he says him we proclaim warning everyone teaching everyone with all wisdom why so that we may present everyone mature in Christ another question for us as we dive in how many of us want to live a fulfilled life how many want to live a mature life for those who are followers of Jesus if there was a button on the lectern now that if we were to rush it and press it it would guarantee spiritual maturity how many of us wouldn't come and press that button I hope that's our desire and while there's no shortcut well we are given the map here it's to go on looking at Jesus and following him faithfully we're going to start by looking at some of the false signposts that were around the Colossians and around us today before we follow the zoom lens that Paul gets out at the end of our section in verses 13 to 15 and focuses in on the work of Christ so here's our first point fullness of life spiritual maturity is found in Jesus alone do you see the negative that Paul puts in verse 8 right at the start he says 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 you see in Colossi 2000 years ago just as there are today there is a lot of hollow philosophy deceptive teaching around but the reason that is dangerous for them and for us is that it sounds really good you know philosophy it can sound very clever we might hear voices of people speaking or teaching in public we might read something that that sounds absolutely on the money here's someone who seems to have all their onions in order someone who's got a list of initials off their name as long as our arm who has all the credentials that the world would say look there's wisdom it sounds tempting but actually Paul says no it's hollow like an Easter egg you knock it and actually the thing is going to break because there's nothing at the center you know for them then there are a range of teachings floating around in the early church that were pretty obvious and yet were nonetheless dangerous that Jesus didn't really rise that he wasn't divine he wasn't God in himself there's a whole load of different things floating around but this doesn't seem to be that you could in your own time if you wanted have a little look at chapter 2 verses 16 to the end of the chapter where Paul lays out what these things look like human tradition and spiritual sounding wisdom might have gone a little bit like this we could have been gathered in a

Colossae free church in the morning and a visiting preacher was in town and he'd have gone something like this look Jesus is brilliant Jesus is wonderful Jesus is amazing I love him and I worship him and it's wonderful Colossians that you have made such a great start that you've abandoned all your former ways and that you're now trusting in and following Christ and you know that guy Paul who first preached the gospel to you through some of his missionaries he's okay as well he's really well-intentioned in in his own way but look you want to be mature don't you you want to really follow Jesus you want to kick your spiritual life up to the next level well and let me tell you a secret our imagined false teacher might say if you really want to follow Jesus then you need to dot dot dot he'd have filled it in in a range of different ways but anyone then and now who fills in those dots with anything other than Christ is actually hollow and deceptive it sounds sharp but it is stupid because Paul says that human tradition and the elemental spirits of the world will only let us down the human tradition is fleshed out just down the page in verses 16 and 17 you can see that it's couched in very Jewish terms for them questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a

[9 : 53] Sabbath human tradition the sort of philosophy that might take us away from fullness in Christ is one that has a very high view of law and a very low view ultimately of Jesus or a hidden view an obscured view of Jesus it's the teaching that says what matters more is me and my performance what matters more is the opinion of others about me and my performance rather than Jesus himself for them it was food laws tends not to be our struggle today for us though can we not be very quick to find our own dignity our own spiritual standing in our own human Christian traditions and whatever our backgrounds wherever we've come from I was privileged to grow up in

a faithful Bible teaching Baptist Church down in Perth in the Central Highlands home home for me is grief and yet whether one is from a Baptist background or a free church background or a church of Scotland background or a Christian Union background I spent five years working with non-denominational Christian unions around universities we all have our own little patterns of thought and of life and of expression that unless we're careful start becoming central because that's how we understand ourselves rather than Jesus himself Paul says don't be taken captive according to human tradition don't let anything go where Jesus himself should be the other strand is elemental spiritual forces it seems in Colossi that they were tempted to worship angels you could see that down in verse 18 let no one disqualify you insisting on a seticism that just means being really harsh on your body and worship of angels going on in details about visions now

I'm not sure that the the regular challenge perhaps for the folk of Kalaway is the desire to worship angels I may be wrong do you tell me over tea and coffee afterwards if that's the case and but spiritual experience that can be something for all of us again that may be the place we're going to find our own sense of fullness our own sense of spiritual maturity finding a kick a particular buzz a sense of well-being disconnected again from Jesus who is the head you see Paul says whether it's in human traditions or in spiritual experience there is no maturity or fullness to be found there they are dead ends in the truest sense of that quite ugly phrase if you think about it they lead only to death because and here's the wonderful opposite rather than human tradition rather than spiritual experience the fullness of God is found in Christ you see that logic of verse 8 don't be taken captive over here not according to Christ why verse 9 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 now in terms of human pictures maybe an empty glass being filled with water is about as good as we can do in terms of trying to hang on to the magnitude of verse 9 in Jesus the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily we've been loving just our few days here in Lewis our first visit to the island wandering around and seeing the the marvelous acts of God's creation had a bit of a swim in Dalbeg climbed up a hill above it and looked out over the sea in the coastlands the God who shapes the rugged coast of Lewis the God who made the deserts of the Atacama the God who raised the heights of Everest and sank the abyssal plains of the Mariana trench the God who scripture tells us almost as an afterthought also created the stars the God of moral purity of utter perfection of blazing holiness of wonderful kindness all of his fullness the whole of it dwells in the man Jesus Christ bodily walking talking living breathing eating sleeping dying and rising again 2000 years ago the fullness of God well bodily in Christ and still does at his right hand for he lives there is fullness Paul says and then notice he says look Colossians it's not like you're detached from that it's not like there's fullness over there which you're left yearning looking at like our dog who's in the mats at the moment would sit looking at a bone on the table he says no in him also in Jesus you have been filled because the Christian has been united to Christ everything that is his becomes ours and so the fullness of God in Christ is given to anyone who trusts in Jesus verses 11 and 12 and 13 list a few of those extraordinary privileges you see in verse 11 the believer in Jesus Christ has been buried with him in his death Paul uses the imagery of circumcision and baptism together to express the inward reality that has been worked in and symbolized by our baptism that wonderful picture of washing of renewal of dying with Christ if you consider that picture of immersion going down into the grave with Jesus Paul says that's true if you trust in Christ all of your old self has gone and been washed away verse 13 he says you've been raised with him sorry the end of verse 12 you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful

working of God the Christian has died to all that's gone before has been raised to all that is new because of everything that Jesus has done these may well be very familiar truths it may well be truths that occasionally can wash over us that we can take for granted but I'd invite us all together just to press pause right now and just to dwell on perhaps even quietly in your hearts to ask that God might give you a sense of the wonder of what Paul has just put in a couple of compressed verses of truth that the God of all things made himself human giving all of his fullness to Christ so that he might give it all to us who left our own devices have no claim on God you have no right before him and yet in sheer kindness are given all things but the main line that Paul is driving along with a sense of wonder and thanks is to those Christians then and us today to not be taken captive that was the command of verse 8 wasn't it so be alert and resist Paul would say to the Colossians we can put this in in equation form I left maths behind me as soon as I could I did my GCSE and then sort of ran screaming out of the building and went headlong into the humanities but I can just

about grasp equations to say that these are true here's the equation of fullness in Christ Jesus plus nothing equals everything that's the logic of the gospel that the person who has absolutely nothing in northern Iraq that we were praying for yet trust in Christ they have everything that they need there's equation one equation two therefore follows Jesus plus anything equals nothing but anyone then or now who says you need something other than Christ for spiritual maturity well that is false teaching that is another gospel as Paul would say in Galatians and so Paul says to them and us be alert do not be taken captive by philosophy and empty deceit I think back to my second year at university I was at Durham University in the north of England and we were privileged to run a carol service every year in the Cathedral and about 3,000 of the university community would come to sing carols and hear God's word it was the most extraordinary thing and I remember the man who at the time was the Dean of the Cathedral saying to myself and a couple of other students who are running it he said oh of course you know

I used to lead the CU at my university we were very interested we thought oh that's we didn't expect that because Durham Cathedral is is not quite the free church when it comes to a vision of scripture and and the gospel he said yes you know I used to believe that the Bible was God's word exclusively I used to believe that Jesus was the only way to God but then I grew out of that very sad but very attractive on one level if you're a young person looking for something more thinking there's someone who's sophisticated and has everything going for them Paul says no be alert resist it you might hear voices more close to home today he would say you can't believe that God wants that for humanity God can't be that restrictive on questions of sexuality and gender he can't be that prescriptive in terms of how you hear his voice or how you sing his praise or how you worship him or how you get to know him might have heard that yourself I know certainly I have you might hear people telling you you're only a real Christian if you have this sort of experience or if you believe this sort of doctrine or if you follow this sort of pattern lots of voices inside and outside the church saying look here's Jesus and here's something else and Paul says no we must resist them every single one is only a deadly wrong direction so there's the big picture Paul says look fullness of life is found in Jesus alone I wonder how many of you use Google Maps we were thinking about long walks at the start weren't you one of the great advances of technology is you can lay out your route all the way through so Thursday morning as we were heading north to Ullipool to the ferry to come up here a bit of a trek leaving St. Andrews just after four in the morning it was helpful to us to have mapped it out on Google Maps you can put it in and you see the whole route in front of you but then you'll know through the technology you can double click on any part of your route you can zoom in and you can see it in a wee bit more detail and that is essential when I suggest what Paul does now in verses 6 down to 12 he gives us the big overview of the route fullness is only found in Jesus and then he double clicks and he zooms in to where that fullness is one where it is secured and that is through Jesus death on the cross let me just reread verses 13 to 15 before we consider this and you Paul says I love the way he uses and you throughout this letter you could see it back in chapter 1 verse 21 he goes from the biggest of canvases right down to the person in the pew he says and you who were dead in your trespasses in the uncircumcision of your flesh God made alive together with him having forgiven us our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands this he set aside nailing it to the cross he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him you see the two things Paul says about the death of Jesus as he zooms in will follow him in the first is that anyone who trusts in Jesus has had their sins forgiven it's verses 13 to 14 I know that we're possibly on some of the most familiar ground I hope of the Christian gospel and yet these verses are wonderful in terms of what they say to us you see sin is the hideous enemy of all whether they know and love the Lord God or not that breaking of his law that foundational but ongoing rejection of his love that seizing of the crown from

[22 : 12] God and putting it on our own heads and going our own way away from him that is a destructive thing it brings about legal consequences Paul says there in verse 14 it brings about the wrath of God the judgments of God but it also brings about the fragmentation of relationship sin is not only rejecting love for God but it's also ignoring love for neighbor those two axes of the human life that's the condition that all people are in Paul says verse 13 you were dead in your trespasses in the uncircumcision of your flesh but God reverses that he takes death and he works life an old Bishop from Alexandria a man called Clement put it this way that Christ is the one who brings sunrise out of sunset for he has crucified death into life striking phrase he has crucified death our death into life how has he done that well verse 14 he has cancelled the record of debt that stood

against us with its legal demands so really really unusual phrase that one fact in the original Greek is the only time in the

New Testament this particular combination of words is used it speaks of a handwritten bill of charge like a handwritten legal record or a handwritten receipt and it conjures up a vivid image for us another little opportunity and invitation to you to reflect I want you to think and a full and disquietion this is not a comfortable thought experiment I want you to think of the times you have sinned against God make it a bit more specific because that's a very broad category for myself at least think of every unkind words you have spoken every kind word you have failed to speak every inclination of the heart that ran selfish and not towards God or that ran selfishly and not towards others think of the actions that you have committed the works of good that you have failed to perform and if you're like me the list becomes very very long doesn't it we could even try and limit it just to this last week and imagine every one of those a handwritten entry on a scroll a handwritten entry on a bit of parchment how long would that list be huge wouldn't it think of a petition that's gone to the government about Brexit six million signatures it'd be bigger than that wouldn't it imagine that on a roll of paper we probably have to pin it to the top of the ceiling and if it was mine it would drop from here hit and unroll to the back and as you were watching that I'd be gone because I would not want you to see what was written out I take it that is true for each one of us so that's what every one has a record of trespasses a record of debt and against each entry the debt that is owed life itself death the judgment of God now think of that scroll for you and with that in your mind look down at what God does with it in Christ at the cross verse 14 this he set aside this that record of debt he set aside nailing it to the cross you see as the nails were hammered into the Lord Jesus Christ in mystery and yet in wonderful grace those nails went through your handwritten record of wrong your legal debt was nailed to the wood with the Lord Jesus and you know we wonderfully and truly say that the good news of the cross is that it's empty because Christ rose from the dead and he is no longer there I don't want to be a little bit cheeky and say you know the really good news of the cross is that it's not empty because that record of debt is still there it has been set aside God says it has been dealt with and taken away forever that is a wonderful gift to the Christian it is a wonderful offer to the person who's not yet fully professing in and resting in and trusting in the work of Jesus Christ because Paul says that is an offer look at the Colossians that is why there is only emptiness elsewhere that is why there's only dryness and death elsewhere because there at the cross Jesus did it all for you so that you might come to God that verse we began with at the start of our service the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God you know one of the real downsides of being a visiting preacher is that I don't know you well I've met some of you but I don't know you well but there's an upside to that because anonymity can give a certain cheekiness I can ask you a question are you trusting in this Jesus do you believe that your record of debt has been nailed to the cross the offer is there for you if you would have him listen to how one hymn writer reflects on this in beautiful prose my sin oh the bliss of this glorious thought my sin not in part but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more praise the Lord praise the Lord oh my soul it's the wonderful fullness that comes through forgiveness at the cross but there's one more strand that Paul pulls out as he zooms in on the death of Jesus is there in verse 15 and maybe a neglected aspect for us sometimes not only have our sins been forgiven at the cross but all of God's enemies and therefore ours have also been defeated at the cross see Jesus comes as the great warrior the one who fights against the devil and all who would follow him you only have to read a gospel to see that that Jesus is the the stronger man who overpowers Satan and his demonic forces and here Paul says the moment of triumph is at the cross we move from a courtroom image the legal record of debt to a military one that idea of triumph and putting them to open shame it's the picture of a Roman general who would have come back to Rome from a campaign off on the frontier and there would have been a huge procession and with the general at the head would have come all of those whom he's defeated behind him being displayed to the mockery to the the taunting of Rome saying here is a glorious victory and Paul says he takes that energy and he applies it to Christ and he says through his death through his cancelling of our records of wrongs the devil the rulers and authorities it's a spiritual term pulled from elsewhere in the letter they are put to open shame by triumphant over them in him I'd love to talk over coffee or perhaps later this evening about quite how that works the church for years has tried to figure out what's the link between the death of Christ for sins and his trial for the devil my own understanding here would be that is because Jesus disarms the rulers and authorities says by

taking the record of wrongs that Satan can wield against God's people to accuse them well that's removed from him nailed to the cross and so the devil now is weak and he cannot have any more authority those accusations that you might think on in the middle of the night you might feel even in the pew as you come to church you're not worthy do you remember that sin you committed you remember those thoughts you have do you remember that weakness you displayed or that lack of worthiness that you feel those things disqualify you that's the voice we can hear sometimes isn't it and Paul says no the devil has been disarmed

Martin Luther who perhaps more vividly than many reflected on both the reality of the power of the devil but the fullness of Jesus triumph puts it this way I love this just from a letter he wrote to a friend so when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell tell him this I admit that I deserve death and hell what of it for I know one who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf his name is Jesus Christ son of God and where he is there I shall be also see sins forgiven enemies defeated and so the Christian of every age in history need only look again to Christ and walk after him if they would know fullness and maturity so as we close a final question do you believe this I asked myself this as much as anyone else do you believe this you see Paul says to the Colossians this is your chart here's the way to maturity looking upon Christ resting in his finished and full work and serving him all the days of your life it's a picture of radical orientation to Jesus we began thinking about a compass bearing didn't we the need for that in the walk well Chris four Christians Jesus is to be that bearing he is to be true north the one whom we follow the Heidelberg

[32 : 22] Catechism one of the foundational documents for our sister reformed churches on the continent puts it this way what is your only comfort in life and in death is the answer and with this we're going to close and I pray that this might be the answer we all can give on that last day before the Lord what is your any comfort that I am not my own but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ would you join me in a prayer let's pray Heavenly Father we thank you for Jesus your son Lord we rejoice to acknowledge that in him all your fullness dwells and we thank you that through his death you forgive our sins and you defeat our enemies that you might give all of his fullness to us please gracious God therefore would we hear your encouragement your exhortation your command to walk just as we have received him to live our lives not taken captive by other things around us but solely captivated by your son and all that he has done Lord you must do that work in us for we cannot and so please by your spirit would you bind those truths to our hearts that we might love and serve Christ for we ask it in his name

Amen