

**“Fulfilled in Christ”**  
Colossians 2:6-15 (NRSV)

As we take up Paul’s letter to the Colossians, we find him further elaborating upon how **they are truly fulfilled in Christ**, and by implication how **we as believers are also fulfilled**. He began by explaining that the Colossians are fulfilled in Christ because they **identified with and drew strength** from the baptism, life, suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord. **The Spirit of Jesus Christ filled them and he fills us. The life of Jesus Christ attracted them and moved them**, as he attracts and moves us. The life of Jesus Christ is a **paradigm for our life**. This is foundational: as Christians we live our lives **“in Christ.”**

1. **“In Christ”: his death, burial and resurrection** (Col. 2:11-12).

Here is the situation the Colossians faced. False teachers were demanding that newly converted, Gentile Christians should be circumcised.

**Circumcision was the customary badge of God’s chosen people.** God, they argued, had said to Abraham, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you, and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10).

Although it was an important commandment, usually faithfully fulfilled, especially by Jewish believers, it should be understood that not every ancient thinker or spiritual leader interpreted **circumcision** as needing to be literally enforced. With a number of biblical writers, for example, **the word was often used “in an adventurous sense”** (William Barclay, p. 166). It spoke of “uncircumcised lips” (Exod. 6:12), or of a “heart” which was “circumcised” or “uncircumcised” (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 30:6; Ezek. 44:7, 9), or of the “uncircumcised ear” (Jer. 6:10). To these writers “to be circumcised meant **not to have a certain operation carried out on a man’s flesh, but to have a change effected in his heart** and in his whole life. **Circumcision was the badge of a person completely dedicated to God”** (p. 167).

Paul describes **the Colossians’ participation in Christ’s death** in this more spiritual way of understanding in verse 11: “In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, [footnote text addition: a circumcision made without hands], by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ...” (Col. 2:11).

Normally, of course, **circumcision doesn't refer to death**, but rather to the rite of circumcising a baby boy, like Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day (Lk. 2:21), by cutting away a small portion of his flesh. But, here the word **circumcision** “**provides a gruesome metaphor for the Crucifixion**” (F. F. Bruce and E. K. Simpson, 1957, p. 234.) Christ's “circumcision” on the cross involved not only the relatively harmless stripping away of a small piece of flesh of a part of his body, but **the violent removal of his entire body in death**. The Colossians, now found “in him” as believers, **shared spiritually in this circumcision, this death**. By becoming believers, their sinful nature was cut away; they died to their former way of life.

Paul's emphasis here is that **the Colossians really, or if you will spiritually, participated in Christ's death**. The crucifixion did something to Jesus and, naturally, it does something to us. When Christ's body was “circumcised” from him in his death upon the cross, we were “circumcised”; we died to our old way of life (Peter T. O'Brien, 1982, p. 116). Paul said in his letter to the Galatians that he was “crucified with Christ; and it is longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:19b-20). Since we have died with him we don't have to serve sin any longer: “... our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” is another way Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 6:6). Ironically, but profoundly true, we have to be **empty** of self, of sin, before we can be **filled**.

Moreover, **the Colossians “were buried with him in [their] baptism” and they “were also raised with him [as they came up out of the water] from the dead”** (2:12). Probably, most Christians were baptized as newly believing adults rather than infants at that time (Barclay, p. 167-168), so the image of being buried into the depths of the water of baptism where we cannot breathe and being raised back to the light and life above water, gasping for air, would be graphically compelling.

Thus there is a profound sense in which the important points in Christian believers' lives **imitate** aspects of important points of the life of Christ. Jesus Christ was circumcised. He was baptized. He lived and suffered and died as we do. And he was raised to life. For Paul, **it's not about following the correct rituals, but about believing in and imitating the only Model** worth emulating: the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Christ.

One of my favourite devotional books that takes up this way of looking at Jesus Christ and learning from him is, **Thomas A Kempis'** famous The Imitation of Christ, first written in the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but still in print. It encourages a simple, devotional trust in Jesus, meditation on his selfless life and acceptance of the way of his cross. It is still compelling, helpful spiritual reading. I recommend it to you. Follow the paradigm: the sinful part of our nature is crucified with Christ; and we are here and now raised with him to newness of life.

## 2. **“In Christ”**: delivered from bondage (Col. 2:13-15).

Paul wants to make the point firmly, clearly, so he moves from the picture of what spiritual “circumcision” can accomplish to two other images, the idea of nailing a placard to the cross and the idea of coming home as a victor with trophies and other spoils from the battle:

And when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it (2:13-15).

**“Dead”** is the description of the spiritual state of every human being who is apart from the saving work of Christ. It is not a flattering term but we cannot escape it. Sin causes death (Rom. 6:23), both literally and figuratively. Most people think sin is fun, and maybe it is for a little while, but soon enough its destructive poison begins to go to work in the sinner and in the lives of many others with whose lives the sinner is connected. Anger, dissension, breakup and so on, ensue. It’s not a pretty picture.

But once we are connected to the life of Christ **there is life after death**. There is sovereign communication of life from God. When Elijah stretched himself upon the dead boy in the widow’s house, his heart throbbed against the stillness of the boy’s chest until, by the power of God, it kindled life (1 Kgs. 17:21). Even so, Christ must be allowed to lay his deeply fulfilled life on our deadness – and then comes life! John the apostle said of Jesus, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (Jn. 1:4). Jesus said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10), and “I am the way, and the truth and the life” (Jn. 14:6a).

**All of us who are believers were “dead** through the trespasses and sins in which [we] once lived,” (Eph. 2:1-2a). **But through Christ, divine surgery was performed.** We were lost, drifting about aimlessly, but now we are sure of our position, moving about with a sense of clear and bold purpose. We were empty, but now we are full. If you have not experienced this, let me assure you that **it is real.** We were actually dead, blind, and empty. But our new relationship with Christ brings us life, light, and fulfillment!

We were not only delivered from the **bondage of death**, but also from the **bondage of guilt** produced by sin.

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross (2:13b, 14 NIV).

The apostle says our guilt was like a “written code” – **like an IOU** signed by our own hand, promising to obey God. This by our lack of obedience, announced our guilt. Another way of looking at it is that the law of the land points the way to what is acceptable behaviour, but once we have broken the law, it hovers over us like an accusing ghost, refusing to give us peace. Jesus Christ took the IOUs and the accusations of laws unfulfilled and **blotted them out** – erased them – and, as if that wasn’t enough, he **nailed them to the cross** above his head -- just as the charges were nailed over him by Pilate (Mk. 15:26; Matt. 27:37; Lk. 23:38; Jn. 19:19) – and then freely forgave us all. J. B. Phillips translation catches the idea:

He has forgiven you all your sins: Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over his own head on the cross (2:13b, 14).

**Martin Luther** experienced the reality of this truth in a dream, in which he was visited at night by Satan, who brought him a record of his own life, written with his own hand. The Tempter asked him, “Is it true, did you write it?” The poor, terrified Luther had to confess it was all true. Scroll after scroll was unrolled, and the same confession was wrung from him, again and again. At length, the Evil One prepared to take his departure, having brought Luther down to the lowest depths of abject misery.

But, suddenly, the Reformer found himself turning to the Tempter, saying: “It is true, every word of it, but write across it all: ‘The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin!’”

The Colossians didn’t have to worry or fret because of the competition. They were complete, whole and fulfilled because they’d been released from the bondage of guilt, and no one could place them under it again. There is no tyranny like that of guilt – ask any obsessive compulsive – and having it lifted is a wonderful, uplifting experience! It is like escaping the pull of gravity – you feel so light and so buoyant – ask any astronaut. That’s why the Colossians were going to be okay. That’s why they needed nothing else.

Paul concludes his exposition of the fulfilled fullness that comes from being in Christ, by stating that it involves a profound **deliverance from the bondage of all the evil powers**. Here he uses a powerful picture with which he would have been entirely familiar from the victory processions of the Roman Empire that still dominated his world, and he turns it upside down! “He [i.e., Christ] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (2:15). The “rulers and authorities” are the demonic powers arrayed against Christ and his Church. The day is coming when the evil empires of the world will be overthrown! The day has already come when any hold that sin and death may have had upon us is already released and they have found that they themselves – former victors and oppressors – are now paraded in chains in Christ’s victory procession!

Paul presents us with a **picture of a triumphal procession** through the streets of a military victory, with the conquered “rulers and authorities” put on shameful display.

The image that Paul has in mind can be seen in **Plutarch**’s description of the three-day Triumph given to **the Roman General, Aemilius Paulus**, upon his return from capturing Macedonia. Great scaffolds were erected in the Forum and along the boulevards of Rome for spectator seating, and all of Rome turned out, dressed in festive white.

**On the first day**, 259 chariots displayed in procession the statues and colossal images taken from the enemy. **On the second day**, innumerable wagons bore the armour of the Macedonians. As Plutarch tells it:

... all newly polished and glittering, the pieces of which were piled up and arranged purposely with the greatest art, so as to seem to be tumbled in heaps carelessly and by chance: helmets were thrown upon shields, coats of mail upon greaves; Cretan targets, and Thracian bucklers and quivers of arrows, lay huddled among horses' bits, and through these appeared the points of naked swords, intermixed with long Macedonian spears. All these arms were fastened together with just so much looseness that they struck against one another as they were drawn along, and made a harsh noise, so that even as the spoils of a conquered enemy they would not be held without dread.

(The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans)

Following the wagons came 3,000 men, carrying the enemies' silver in 750 vessels, followed by more treasure.

**On the third day**, came the captives, preceded by 120 sacrificial oxen with their horns gilded and their heads adorned with ribbons and garlands, next Macedonian gold, then the captured king's chariot, crown and armour. Then came the king's servants, weeping, with hands outstretched, begging the crowds for mercy. Next came his children. Then King Perseus himself, clad entirely in black, followed by endless other prisoners. Finally came the victorious general,

... seated on the chariot, magnificently adorned, dressed in a robe of purple, interwoven with gold, and holding a laurel branch in his right hand. All his army, in like manner, with boughs of laurel in their hands, divided into their bands and companies, followed the chariot of their commander, some of them singing verse, according to the usual custom of songs of triumph and the praise of Aemilius' deeds.

In the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, **God achieved a great victory over the evil powers of this world**, making "a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (2:15b NIV). Do we know and feel this? God wants us to see that even though they still exist, they are defeated. Satan and his hosts have been conquered and sentenced to death; although their final end is yet to be, they are already shamefully paraded in God's victory parade. Thus we need not fear the outcome of the battle. Christ has conquered and he lives! We have conquered! And we will conquer!

In view of all this, there is nothing that anyone else can or has to do for us, especially for our salvation. Therefore, why look to anyone but Christ for ultimate fulfillment? For “in Christ” we have everything!

Amen

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