

WHAT'S IN THE PACKAGE?

Colossians 2:3-10

November 11, 1966, Marine Captain Orson Swindle was flying his F-8 fighter jet on his 205th combat mission over North Vietnam. It was scheduled to be his final mission. It did, indeed, turn out to be his last flight, but for the wrong reason. His plane was shot down. He ejected and parachuted to the ground where he was immediately captured by North Vietnamese soldiers. He spent the next 6 years in a prison camp in North Vietnam. His captors were creative in their torture methods. They tied parachute cords like tourniquets around his arms above the elbow so tightly that they caused his hands to contract from the pressure on his ligaments. They tied his arms absurdly far behind his back then hoisted his body off the floor by looping the cords over rafters and hauling him up. The strain was so great it pulled his shoulders out of their sockets. He said the pain was so intense he thought he was going insane. There were countless brutal beatings and interrogations. In order to get them to let up he would tell them lies. For instance, they relentlessly questioned him about who was in his squadron so he finally gave them the names of his high school football coaches and teammates. There were slivers of humor in the darkness. At one point he convinced his captors that November 10 was National Doughnut Day in the United States. He told his fellow prisoners of his ruse and they then all affirmed that it was true. After that his captors would take stale bread, deep fry it, sprinkle sugar on it, a sort of version of a doughnut, and serve it to them on November 10 in honor of National Doughnut Day. No one ever told the North Vietnamese that they had been tricked into celebrating the birthday of the Marine Corps. One of the things that was difficult for the POW's was that while they were relentlessly interrogated it became apparent that the main goal of all the torture and interrogation was not to gain a military advantage through intelligence, but to break their will.

One thing Captain Swindle could testify to, is that if you are held captive those who hold you captive do not seek good things for you. They likely seek to inflict harm on you. Is it not obvious that it is a good idea to never become a captive? And yet, throughout history much of the human race has been and continues to be held captive. The Bible tells me this is true. Let's see what it says about that and learn what we can about avoiding captivity in Colossians 2:3-10.

WE ARE IN DANGER OF BEING CAPTURED

After telling his readers in verse 3 that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ Paul warned, "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine sounding arguments." The word translated "fine sounding arguments" is unusual in the Bible. The lexical definition of it is "persuasive speech." Plato distinguished it from making a logical, reasoned argument that led to a conclusion. So it came to mean plausible sounding but false.

The Colossian Christians had little knowledge of the God of Israel and his Messiah prior to put their faith in Jesus. They were mostly from Gentile pagan backgrounds. They had few resources to guide both their faith and practice. Now some people were filling their ears with some ideas about what it means to believe in and obey this God. There is considerable debate about just

what those people were saying. We don't know for certain. I believe that they were promulgating the same kind of thing Paul often encountered. It was Jesus plus Judaism.

The Colossians were not at the level of crisis that prompted Paul to write the letter to the Galatians. But I think it was similar teaching, it just hadn't taken hold in Colossae yet like it had in Galatia. This is the heart of the message of this letter. Paul was concerned that this "persuasive speech" they were hearing was going to derail them. Paul was more blunt with the Galatians. In Galatians 1:6 he called what these people were promulgating a different gospel. It was so dangerous he said in Galatians 1:8 that people who were spreading these ideas should be "eternally condemned." In other words, he saw it as spiritually toxic stuff. It was deadly.

Paul's description of the situation in Colossians 2 isn't as combative as Galatians, but he made it clear that what the Colossians were hearing from some of these wannabe preachers was different from his gospel and was really bad news. In verse 8 he wrote, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world, rather than Christ."

The people who were spreading the "false gospel" were trying to capture the minds and hearts of the Colossian Christians. Paul was not condemning philosophy per se. In that day philosophy had to do with understanding life. He was attacking a particular philosophy that claimed to be the way to understand life, one that while it sounded consonant with the message of Jesus Christ, it in fact negated it. It was this deceptive philosophy they needed to avoid.

It would be easy for us to regard this as ancient history and say this is fine for anyone interested in ancient history, but frankly I could care less. However, is that the point of the Bible? Was it written merely so we could know some stuff about history? No, this history is recorded to teach us something. And the lesson here is that people are still trying to deceive other people with plausible but specious arguments and they are still trying to take others captive. In other words, while the arguments may be different, the deceptive philosophies may vary, today we face the same threat the Colossians did. There are still people, lots of people, trying to take us captive. In 1 John 4:1 John said, "Many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Those who are trying to capture you:

1. Remember what I said in the introduction. If someone is trying to capture you it is not because they are trying to do you a favor. They have ill intent for you. Jesus said in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." People are going to come along looking and saying things that sound good. But Jesus said they are dangerous and destructive.

What makes this insidious is those who are communicating these dangerous arguments may think they only want good for you. They may not be aware of the deadly nature of their message. They may have the best of intentions. Some will not. There have always been those

whose real motive is personal gain of some sort, but there are those who are duped into thinking they are telling you the truth.

Laurie and I have had the experience of dealing with some people we care about who were enthusiastic about the gospel of some nutritional supplement products. They heard all the arguments and pep talks for these products and went all in on them. They turned their persuasive speech on us to buy in to their products. They only wanted our good. They were convinced this is what we needed. Unfortunately we had some problems with their new found nutritional faith. Their products were very expensive. But the real sticking points were first the people who regaled them with all the evidence for their product and the pep talks were trying to make money off of them and us. There's nothing wrong with making money, but because they were selling something their objectivity and their motivation is immediately suspect in my mind. My bias is if someone is trying that hard to sell me something I'm suspicious that their product cannot sell itself. In other words, it's not very good. Second, there were obvious flaws in their arguments. When we pointed out some of these flaws the responses we heard were weak and specious. Finally, over time it appeared to us the proof simply was not in the pudding. The product made no difference. My point here is that those we cared about were not trying to do us harm, but because they themselves had been deceived they were being used by others who wanted nothing more than to make a profit off of us. This is to illustrate not that someone is trying to make money off of you, but that if you back it up far enough you will encounter in all deceptive speech and philosophy at some point there is someone who is trying to capture you, and that is never for your good.

2. Second, they are persuasive. They are always going to sound good and convincing. Who tries to win people over to his or her idea by telling you something that is ludicrous or unappealing? They are always going to make it look and sound good, but that doesn't mean it is good. We have a couple of future flooring issues looming at our house. A few days ago we saw a commercial on TV in which a company said they would put in new floors in your house for only \$99 per room. That sounded great. We could do that. It was persuasive. We're not going to do it though, because I know it's not true. In the end I know it will cost way more than that. They are trying to capture my business with persuasive, but false speech. No one is going to say, "come buy carpet from us. We'll charge you an exorbitant sum, give you a substandard product and do a lousy job installing it, but we'll make a terrific profit!" They always make it sound better than it is.

In 2 Corinthians 11:14-15 Paul wrote, "even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. Is it not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness?" We should not be surprised if we get offered philosophies or religions that sound appealing. Just because they seem persuasive and appealing does not mean that they are true. That's the second thing we should note about these ersatz philosophies. They are deceptive. They promise something that they cannot deliver. Behind them is an enemy, a spiritual enemy who wants nothing more than to divert you from God so as to destroy your soul. And he is a liar!

3. Finally note that they are based on the traditions of men. Notice that verse 8 says that these ideas are according to the “elemental spiritual forces of this world, and not according to Christ.” Many recent commentators believe that Paul referred there to spiritual beings, demons, if you will, who are behind the lies. That is possible, but I think the New American Standard Bible is correct in saying this is about “the elemental principles” of the world. There are some things that just seem natural to humans. We default to these things. One of the most obvious, and this was at stake in Colossae, is the idea that our relationship with God is all about what we earn. We have to deserve his acceptance by doing the right things. After all, this is how the world works. Even if you’ve been a Christian all your life and know the gospel of grace thoroughly, you almost certainly struggle with this idea at times. We all do. The main point I want you to see though is Paul is saying the problem with these find sounding philosophies is they are based on the thinking and traditions of humans. They do not come from God.

This is still true today. The philosophies being thrown at us that are intended to capture us and draw us away from Christ are all about what humans naturally think. They typically rule out or ignore altogether God’s revelation of his truth. If you toss out whatever revelation God has given in Christ then these persuasive arguments will indeed make sense from a human perspective.

THE ONLY DEFENSE IS THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST

Paul states his point a couple of ways. In verse 3 he says all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ. Treasure is, by definition, that which is most valuable. When I was a kid I had some treasures. I had a little model of the Empire State Building that I got when we visited New York. And I had this tiny toy musket that I bought as a souvenir when we visited The Hermitage, the home of Andrew Jackson, in Tennessee. I really treasured those things. I was stupid, because they were worthless. What would you think of me if I still had those and kept them in a safe deposit box at the bank? A real treasure has real value. By the treasures of wisdom and knowledge Paul meant all the most valuable things, the things that we need to know about God, about ourselves, the meaning of life, what is right and wrong, what happens after we die and about how we should live. These are by far the most important, most valuable things to know. And all of them are found in Christ.

He is not saying if it’s not Christ then it’s not true. If you wish to become an accountant you need to be trained in the rules, procedures and practices of accounting. It would be absurd for you if you are taking an accounting class to object saying, “All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ. I have Christ so I don’t need you to tell me how to do accounting.” If you want to be an accountant you need to be taught accounting, and knowing Christ won’t help. Neither is it un-Christian to learn accounting.

But when it comes to knowing who God is and how we can actually be related to him and loved by him, when it comes to knowing what human nature is like, why we are the way we are, and who we are, when it comes to knowing what matters in life and what our purpose in life is, when it comes to knowing right from wrong, good from evil, when it comes to knowing what our value is, when it comes to knowing what happens after we die, all of that is found in Christ.

There are brilliant people in this world who do not know Jesus and do not care to. There are people that have unraveled many of the mysteries of science and have created technological marvels that I have no hope of understanding. Consider my phone. It astounds me what it can do. Somebody created the systems, the hardware and the software that make that thing work. I have some general ideas about how some of this works, but I could never have dreamed this up. And they somehow stuffed a woman named Siri inside that tiny little phone. How did they get her in there? I have no stinking idea. My point is, this thing is just one example of the fact that there are people who are so much smarter than I in so many ways. But they don't understand the ultimate meaning of human existence and they are tragically mistaken about how to find and experience fullness of life. If they don't have Christ they are pursuing little trinkets and mistaking them for treasure. That is why people are generally continually searching for real peace.

In verses 9-10 you see the word “fullness” or completeness used twice. First all of the fullness of deity lives in Christ. The completeness of God exists in Jesus Christ. This statement lays to rest a number of theological errors. It finishes off the Jehovah's Witness claims that Jesus was actually an angel. All that God is exists in Jesus. He is literally fully God.

Generally, in fact, the persuasive arguments of people who are seeking to take us captive will falter at precisely this point. They will want to insist that Jesus is a man, a prophet, a radical, a revolutionary, an angel, a divine person of some kind, or a sort of highly enlightened person, but not the creator God. But Paul, a former Jewish rabbi for whom calling a man divine would have been a horror and blasphemy, insists that Jesus, in fact, to Paul's amazement and wonder, is fully God. He was then, and is today. He will be forever.

There is a sort of Christian error that says you believe in Jesus and have him in your life, and that's good, but it's not enough. There is more to be had in the Christian life. Let's be clear. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. When you have Christ in your life you have all that God is. You have the Holy Spirit within you. Romans 8:9 says, “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ they do not belong to Christ.” If you belong to Jesus, you have the Spirit. You have all that God is living inside you. There simply is no more.

Second notice that Paul uses the term “fullness” when he says, “in Christ you have been brought to fullness.” The English Standard Version translates that “you have been filled in Him.” The fullness of life we all seek comes in Christ.

What is that fullness of life? What all of us want is that we are no longer burdened by guilt, we are totally forgiven, we are loved by God, we are at peace with him and totally at peace with who we are. We have joy and we have a purpose for life. We feel fulfilled or satisfied, and we are free of fear because we have hope for the future. Paul's claim is that we get that in Jesus Christ.

So that means that everybody who believes in Jesus is totally full, totally at peace, full of joy and satisfied with life, right? That has to be true if they have Christ in them and have all the fullness of God filling their lives doesn't it? That seems to make sense, but then we have to ask why was Paul writing this letter? It was because he knew the Colossians were tempted to look for something else to complete them. They weren't as far gone as the Galatians, but they were listening. We study this book because the same thing often happens today. People are not satisfied with what Christ brings. How could this be true if Paul is correct and fullness of life is found in Christ? Why look anywhere else?

Most of us who are Christians would admit that we wish we were more fulfilled, more satisfied, more full of life, felt more loved, had more joy, experienced God more and were more at peace than we are. This makes us potentially susceptible to someone who comes along and offers us more. We think, "Sure seems like it ought to be better than it is. Maybe there is more." How are we to understand this if Jesus is the fullness of God and gives us fullness of life? I don't have all the answers to that question, but there are a number of factors that I can see.

First, there seems to be an odd quirk in human nature that causes it to think the grass could always be greener somewhere else. This is one I think the Lord will have to explain to me because it seemed to be there even before the Fall, if Genesis is correct. Adam and Eve lived in the perfect environment. They had no fear, life was full and meaningful but not burdensome, death did not stalk them and they had a perfect relationship with God. He was right there with them in some tangible form. Yet when Satan came along and said, "There's something better that God is keeping from you," they bought it. They thought, "what I have isn't enough." There was no better than what they had. Let me repeat that. Satan lied to them. There is no more full life than what they possessed. What they experienced was as good and as full as life can ever be. Yet they fell for the idea that maybe there was something more they could have. The sad fact of human existence is that no matter how good you have it, something in you seemingly wants to believe it could somehow be better. Always. So part of our problem is that. When we go to a restaurant we order our meals and often when they are brought I look at what others have ordered and think, "I should have gotten that." It's just natural to think the grass is greener somewhere else. It is part of being human apparently.

Second, no matter what you have in Christ, Satan always wants to draw you away from God. So he will always tell you that you are missing out on something. There is more. Jesus isn't enough. You are being bombarded with that message from the enemy continually.

Third, we live in a fallen world. We still experience the effects of that and we still have the presence of sin in our own lives that brings with it all of its negative consequences. Our souls will never be totally satisfied until sin and evil are no longer present, until fear and death are banished and until we have that kind of immediate, tangible relationship with God that Adam and Eve had. That's what we long for, and there is a gap between the best we experience now in this life and that ideal. So is there something better than Christ? In a sense yes, but there's nothing better in this life. It's only better in the next.

I recently had an experience that kind of parallels this. Last weekend Laurie went to Seattle to spend a few days with her parents. Her mom has been dealing with some health issues so Laurie went to help out a little and mostly to be an encouragement. In case you haven't been listening to me, ever, Laurie is the joy of my life. She makes life full and joyful. I hate it when she is away. While she was there we talked at least once every day. In fact, that phone call with her was really the best part of my day. And it was great talking to her. But it was also bittersweet. While I enjoyed talking to her what I really want is to be physically with her. Talking is good, but there is something special about being literally in her presence that is way better. Our relationship is intended to be shared by being together. I felt a little sad and incomplete until she came home and we could be together. So it is with God. Reading his Word, talking to him is wonderful. But it is not the same as being with him. It is bittersweet. So we are always going to be a little sad and incomplete until we are with him. That's just how life is in this fallen world.

Fourth, none of us experiences Christ perfectly in this life. Most of us are convinced that what we really want is for God to give us perfect circumstances here. We kind of think if we had that then we would be happy and have a full life. In other words, we let flawed thinking interfere. We get upset with God when life turns disappointing or especially if it turns tragic. We get dominated by our fear that it might become disappointing or tragic. We let those things determine our sense of peace and joy, thus try to hang our fulfillment on them. As long as we do that we actually lessen the fullness of life that we could potentially have in Christ.

So Paul tells us in verses 6-7, "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness." In other words, don't go looking for something else! We received Jesus as Lord, fully God. We chose to let him be Lord of our lives. We put our faith in him. So Paul says, "Stay rooted in him." Keep living by faith in him. Keep trusting in him for the fullness of life. Let him determine the outcomes of life for you as you be faithful to him. Trust that what he supplies is enough. Always. Express that trust by giving thanks to him. This is the source of fullness of life. There simply is no other.

Imagine that our peach tree gets unhappy. It says that the other side of the yard gets more sun and the soil is better there. It starts whining that it would be healthier on the other side of the yard and wants to move. That would be dumb. I would say, "Don't you remember last summer? You were full of leaves and produced so much fruit that we had to prop up your branches. You are as healthy as you could be. You have all you need so stay where you are." That's what Paul is telling us.

APPLICATION

WAKE UP!

Wake up to the fact that you are continually hearing messages that sound appealing but that are intended to draw you away from Christ. They will often seem to make sense and in some cases might even resonate with something inside you. But they are trying to capture you! Oh come on Rick, that's not a thing. Yes it is. Jesus warned in Matthew 24:4-5, "Watch out that no one

deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah’ and will deceive many.”

Those messages come in lots of forms. There is always the message that was at the heart of the one the Colossians were hearing. You’ve got to earn God’s love. You’ve got to try harder and be better for him to accept you. If you could do that then Jesus didn’t need to die on a cross. That message seems fundamental to us, it is one of the basic principles of this world. It strikes at the heart of the work and message of Jesus Christ.

Our culture bombards us with the message of naturalism. This world is all there is. There is no spiritual realm, no life after death, no morality. There are only values that each one arbitrarily chooses based on personal preference. This means there is no God, no morality, no hope after death.

This philosophy appeals because it says you don’t need to feel guilty about anything. You don’t answer to some higher spiritual power, so you are free. You are free to do whatever you desire. You are free of guilt. Since there is nothing more than this life it is only logical to get all the pleasure and joy out of it that you can because when it’s gone that’s all there is. So get as much money as you can, have as much fun as you can, get as much sex as you can, do whatever makes you feel good and makes you happy. It claims that you will experience real freedom and fulfillment in life if you follow it. If you do not all you get is guilt, bondage and loss of real pleasure. The only thing that makes sense is look out for yourself, do what feels good and try to make yourself feel happy today because this is all you’ve got. Day after day you are hearing that message in a wide array of forms.

In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins wrote, “When a person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion.” Richard Rorty, a literature professor at Stanford University, said, “We try to arrange things so that students who enter as bigoted, homophobic, religious fundamentalists will leave college with views more like our own. We are going...to (try to) discredit you in the eyes of your children...to make your views seem silly.”

These messages can come in subtle forms. I recently encountered one example of this. When Toby was young he used to read a series of books about Hank the Cow Dog that were written by a man named John Erickson. Hank is a mutt who lives on the M-Cross cattle ranch in the panhandle of Texas. He tells the stories in the books. He sees himself as the head of ranch security. The ranch is owned and run by a cowboy named High Loper and his wife, Sally May. They have 2 kids named Alfred and Molly. Hank has a buddy whom he calls his assistant, a dog named Drover. Hank gets into all manner of jams but always comes through. The stories are funny and delightful. CBS chose the first book to make into an animated show to put on during the cartoon period of Saturday morning. Erickson, of course, was pleased. He was puzzled though when they aired the show to find that some of the details had been changed. Sally May now ran things. She wasn’t married to High Loper, but he was now merely an employee who worked for her. Alfred and Molly were gone from the story. The place was no longer in Texas;

it was in Arizona and it was no longer a cattle ranch. Now it was a chicken farm. It didn't seem like a big deal but it was curious that they changed the story details for no apparent reason. It certainly didn't enhance the story. He eventually found out that there was some motivation behind those changes and it had nothing to do with the story. Erickson is a Christian and he was dismayed when he figured out what was going on with his story.

High Loper and Sally May were no longer married because marriage is a trap for women. The ranch was no longer run by a family because family is an outmoded and oppressive social institution. Alfred and Molly were gone because children are a barrier to women's career aspirations. And it was no longer a cattle ranch because a cattle ranch is a scourge on the environment. Behind those messages is the idea that to have full life a woman must be free of the entanglements of family, be "successful," have lots of money and be able to express her sexuality whenever and with whomever she desires. This was a show intended for kids! The point is that behind all that you see and hear in our society, there is a worldview, a mindset that in the end is about how fullness of life is found. It infuses everything that we encounter today. We need to see it for what it is.

Before we fall captive to our world's "fine sounding argument" we should ask whether it delivers what it promises. Has our secular dash for more of this life produced fullness? Psychologist Martin Seligman says that Americans are richer, healthier, more youthful and safer than they were 50 years ago. But they are not happier. There has been a 10 fold increase in the incidence of depression in our country. Our culture is awash in antidepressants. At any given time 15% of Americans are taking them and 25% could be clinically diagnosed with depression.

Dr. Archibald Hart in his book *Thrilled To Death* says that the pursuit of pleasure and happiness leads to anhedonia, which means the inability to experience pleasure. As a result most teenagers today are "overstimulated, perpetually connected to technology and bored." The problem according to Jonathan Morrow in his book, *Think Christianly*, is they have followed their parents' example of pursuing happiness for themselves as the goal of life. This is so much of a problem that the Dartmouth School of Medicine commissioned a study of US youth because of the rapidly deteriorating mental and behavioral health of kids in this country.

The suicide rate among adults in our country has risen by 30% since the turn of the century. Dr. Julie Phillips of Rutgers University says it is because life has not turned out the way people hoped it would. Comedian Louis CK one night on the Conan O'Brien late night show said, "sometimes when things clear away, and you're not watching anything, you're in your car, and you start going, 'Oh no, here it comes'... I'm alone. It starts to visit on you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it." That is what our culture's philosophy has for us. That's not fullness. Do you see what has happened? A philosophy promised freedom and the good life, fullness. It sounded smart and appealing. And it doesn't work. It cannot deliver what it promises.

Look for the assumptions, the beliefs that underlie what we are hearing and see the lies. There is a crucial question we should ask of everything we hear and see. “***Where is this telling me that life and fullness come from?***” It is rare that you are going to hear that fullness comes from Jesus Christ, the Lord of all.

Sam Storms wrote in his book, *The Hope of Glory*, “Any idea or system of thought that would suggest (Jesus) is not supreme and sovereign or that is not infinitely and exclusively worthy of our absolute devotion and adoration is demonic at its core.” Any such system that looks to anything other than Jesus for fullness of life is a delusion

STAY ROOTED

The Super Bowl is coming. Maybe you remember a Fed Ex commercial that was made for the Super Bowl in 2003. This was not long after the movie *Castaway* was out. It’s story was about a Fed Ex employee whose plane went down in the South Pacific and he survived only to be stranded all alone on an island. The commercial depicts this employee delivering a package he had saved and brought back from that island after his long ordeal on that island. He goes to a house and rings the doorbell. A woman answers and he tells her, “I was marooned on an island for 5 years with this package and I swore if I ever got off I would deliver it because I work for FedEx.” She says, “Oh that’s very admirable.” He starts to turn away but then stops and says, “I had that package so long, I’m curious. Would you mind telling me what’s in it?” She says, “Oh, nothing really. There’s a satellite phone, a GPS locator, fishing rod and reel, water purifier and some seeds.”

He had all he needed right there on the island for both survival and rescue, but never opened the package. Sometimes I think we’re like that. We have all we need for fullness of life in Jesus Christ, but we don’t open the package. We scramble around trying to catch rain water and crack open coconuts, barely existing on a spiritual starvation diet. Believe what God supplies is enough.

In Ephesians 3:17-18 Paul prayed for believers “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” He goes in in verse 19 to say that it is in knowing this love “that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” How full is God? Totally full. That is the fullness that Christ will produce for us.

Stay rooted in Jesus, which means do what a plant does when it is rooted in the soil. It stays tight to the soil and continually draws sustenance from it. That’s what we need to do with Jesus Christ. Keep believing, keep trusting, keep drawing love, strength, grace, peace and joy from him.