

CROSSING THE BORDER

An Expositional Study of Colossians

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CHAPTER FIVE

HIS WARNING OF SNARES 2:11-23

YES. more warnings, for Paul, like a true pastor, is deeply anxious about the safety and the welfare of the flock.

It appears, from the first verse of this chapter, that he had not visited Colossae, and that, therefore, these Christians were not his children in the faith. I would think that Epaphras, their founder and leader, 1:7, was one of Paul's converts, and that these believers had, in the main, been brought to CHRIST by him. If that be the case, then the readers of this letter would be the apostle's grandchildren; and he certainly displays here a grandfatherly concern for their spiritual well-being.

There is clear evidence here that these Christians have grown "**in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,**" II Peter 3:18. But false teaching is afoot; and it seems, as we have said earlier, as if Epaphras has gone to Rome to discuss with Paul about it, and how to meet it.

Our present passage is a very difficult one; but we must try together to grasp something of the drift of its arguments.

THE PITFALL OF JUDAISM, II-17

The Old Covenant and the New - is the alternative theme of verses 11-12. The controversy seems to have dogged Paul's footsteps almost everywhere he went. It was a widespread view of these teachers that no Gentile could become a Christian except via Judaism - he must, therefore, submit to the law of circumcision, the outward sign of covenant relationship with GOD. But, says the apostle, with the coming of CHRIST a new covenant has been inaugurated, wherein is a new outward sign of covenant relationship, a new circumcision, not now of the flesh but of the spirit, symbolised by the ordinance of baptism, in which is typified the recipient's identification with CHRIST in His burial in death, and resurrection to life - "**I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live,**" Galatians 2:20.

Are we, then, to take it that Paul was speaking disparagingly, even scornfully, of the Old Covenant? By no means.

The Shadow and the Substance - is the way he designates the contrast in verses 16-17. Under the Old Economy of Law there were rules and regulations which the godly man was expected to observe - foods and feasts were appointed of GOD for man's health and holiness. Under the New Economy of Grace, however, all is altered - even "**the sabbath day**" is, with Divine blessing, changed from the seventh to the first.

No Gentile convert is to be "**judged**," condemned, because of non-compliance with these ancient requirements. We Christians "**are not under law, but under grace**," Romans 6:14.

That doesn't mean that we may live lawlessly, with a licence to sin (verse 15); "**God forbid**," says the horrified apostle. No, indeed; but our conduct now has a new motive - not legal, but love.

"**Thou shalt do no murder**" is not cancelled, but is controlled by a new spirit, "**Thou shalt love thy neighbour**". But, I ask again, does all this mean that the old order is to be despised? No, again - "**which are a shadow of things to come**," a Divinely directed fore-shadowing of the CHRIST Who was to be the Substance. All these ordinances pointed on to Him, and when He came as the complete fulfilment of them all, their purpose was fully served, and the old order changed, giving place to the new.

"**A shadow**" - yes, but, don't forget, a GOD-appointed shadow. All those Levitical sacrifices and offerings did not originate with Moses, but only came through him, from GOD Himself, so we will not speak irreverently of them, but thankfully recall their substantive significance.

The Blessing in CHRIST -is, consequently, placed before us in verses 13-15. Through our union with Him in His dying, and His rising, "**together with Him**," we have, amongst many other blessings, the primary boon of the forgiveness of sins, for through "**His cross**," and "**in it**," He accomplished an open triumph over all the forces of evil.

Note how Paul here describes "**the great Transaction**," as Philip Doddridge's hymn characterises it.

Consider, then, "**the handwriting of ordinances that was against us**". Was this not the Ten Commandments, "**written with the finger of GOD**," Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10? "**Against us**," because they convict and condemn us for having so gravely and so grievously broken them.

There stands the Law: how did Love deal with the situation? "**Took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross**." When the Romans crucified a man, it was customary to write a card stating the nature of his crime, and to nail it to the upright of his cross, which is exactly what happened in the case of our Lord, whose "**superscription of His accusation**," Mark 15:26, proclaimed that His crime was His claim to be "**King of the Jews**," as if setting Himself against Caesar.

The truer "**title**," as Paul tells, was that the Ten Words were nailed there, and that the condemnation was for the breaking of the whole gamut of GOD's commands - not that He had broken them, but we had, and He was suffering in our stead. "**The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all**," Isaiah 53:6. And so, "**he that believeth on Him is not condemned**," John

3:18; 5:24. Blessed assurance!

Not in Judaism, except as a picture, but in JESUS is all our hope of Full Salvation.

THE PITFALL OF GNOSTICISM, 18

This comes next under consideration. We have already indicated some of its significance; but here Paul goes into more detail, and in a few graphic expressions he gives -

Some of its teachings. It was a curious mixture, and a crude bundle of strange fancies: but let our verse speak for itself.

(a) "**A voluntary humility**," that is, feigned, not genuine. They put it on to put you off your guard. It is almost an obsequiousness; but don't you allow it to "**beguile**" you.

(b) "**Worshipping of angels**" - that spurious line of descending intermediaries for the creating of the world, since they allege the evil of matter as such, and therefore GOD's holy inability to have any direct connection with its formation. How ludicrously contrasted to the Bible's simple revelation.

(c) "**Intruding into those things which he hath not seen**" - the things unseen refer to the cult of the Mystery Religions which flourished then in those quarters. After a period of mystic preparation, one was ready to step into the secret. This "**intruding**" was the final step into the inner shrine, and one became an initiate. It was apparently thus that one became, as it were, a fully-fledged member of this Gnostic sect.

(d) "**Vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind**" - we have already noted that their vaunted humility was feigned, for their own purpose. Here the real truth is out, for this phrase is intended to convey their intellectual pride, and snobbery. So much for their humility! Their very name Gnostic is the Greek *gnosis*, which means knowledge - "we know"! Well, well!

Some of its losses - may be mentioned.

(a) It robs its devotees of that true humility which in Scripture after Scripture is seen to be of such high value in the eyes of GOD - for instance, "**the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of GOD of great price**," I Peter 3:4. I often think, and sometimes say, that there is no limit to what GOD can do with us if only we are humble enough. Perhaps we may say that the key to this quality is "**Not I, but CHRIST**," Galatians 2:20.

(b) This queer teaching robs its adherents of the only Mediator, instead of the long procession of deteriorating go-betweens. The Christian truth is that "**there is One Mediator between GOD and men, the man Christ Jesus**," I Timothy 2:5.

GOD's approach to men is by that One, "**GOD was in CHRIST reconciling the world unto Himself**", II Corinthians 5:19. Man's approach to GOD is by that One, "**No man cometh unto the Father but by Me**," John 14:6. What a tragedy to be deprived of all the benefits of His mediatorial office.

(c) This odd doctrine negatives the revealed mystery, with all its accompanying "**riches**," as referred to in chapter 1, verse 27, of this Epistle.

The fact is that Christianity is the one only true Mystery Religion - held hidden through the long years of preparation covered by the Old Testament till men of faith, Gentile as well as Jew, were invited by GOD to take the step of initiation into the glorious company of the blessed inheritors of the Open Secret, part of whose "**riches**" is the deeply moving truth that CHRIST did not merely come down to die for you, but comes to dwell in human hearts that invite Him in - "**Christ in you, the hope of glory**," Colossians 1:27. All this the peculiar Gnostics miss. For us who are believers, this golden mystery holds all the secret of Full Salvation.

THE PITFALL OF ASCETICISM, 20-3

A variation of Gnosticism.

There were features common to both, but the most significant difference here was the emphasis upon the denial of the body; yet even this springs from the notion of the innate evil of matter.

(a) This is a religion of don't - "**touch not, taste not, handle not**," 21.

It reminds me of a small boy who, when asked his name, said that it was "Don't". When told he had misunderstood the enquiry, he insisted that he had told them his right name. "Whatever I do it is always Don't, Don't, Don't; yes, my name is Don't". Poor child; and poor religionist, whose life is circumscribed by an eternal Don't. Oh, for the positive delights of the Christian life - a bliss of which the ascetics were bereft.

(b) It was characterised by a pseudo-wisdom - "**a shew of wisdom**". They fancied themselves, yet, for one thing, how unwise was their neglect of the body. Do you think we Christians are careful enough of our physical well-being?

- Should we not heed the reminder that "**your body is the temple of the HOLY GHOST**," I Corinthians 6:19?

- Ought we not, by sensible feeding, by due cleansing, and by proper exercise, seek - so far as we may - to keep our body fit for any demands He may make of us for His service?

Beware of the slick remark that it is better to wear out than to rust out. Yes, I am sure of that; but I am still more sure that it is better still to last out. How unwise it is to be "**neglecting the body**."

(c) It exalts its own will - "**in will worship**," thinking by the exercise of strong will-power to attain to the perfection desired; but it is not, in any sense, a godly will, but is of "**the flesh**," that is, the lower carnal nature, which, says Paul, is ever "**lusting against the Spirit**," Galatians 5:17. Neither the new birth, nor any resulting blessing, is attainable "**of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man**," John 1:13. Oh, for the worship of the will of GOD -

"Thy wonderful grand will, my GOD,
With triumph now I make it mine;

And faith shall cry a joyous Yes
To every dear command of Thine."

But what of the result of this cult of asceticism, does it work for goodness?

A complete failure. It is "**not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh**". Our illuminating of the meaning of this difficult phrase, is, "not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh". A spiritual malady cannot be cured by a physical remedy.

So, as we leave this passage, we remark on -

THE PITY OF IT ALL

In verse 20, the apostle asks, almost pathetically, "**Wherefore if ye be dead with CHRIST . . . are ye subject to ordinances?**" That is, if you really and truly are Christians, why ever allow yourselves to be misled and tied up with all these rules and regulations, whether emanating from Judaism, or from Gnosticism, or from Asceticism? "**Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage,**" he would say, as in Galatians 5:1.

In verse 19, he has put his finger on the reason why any such defection should ever take place, "**not holding the Head**" - not holding to the headship of the Head. We all know, if we allowed this in the physical frame, what dreadful consequences would accrue among the limbs of the body. Paul uses these material facts as similes of spiritual truths, as he has done already with such effect in I Corinthians 12.

The Source of our Service - "**all the body by joints and bands. . . knit together**". When all the parts are in right position, and healthy condition, the brain is able to direct the body in its various functions, and to regulate the service that it is intended to render. The thing holds good in the spiritual sphere. Let us see to it that there shall be no dislocation of the soul's "**joints,**" no slipped discs of the heart - that there shall be no shrinking of the soul's "**bands,**" the spiritual sinews, and moral muscles. So shall we make sure that the Head shall not be impeded in His strategic work in us, and through us, in service.

The Spring of our Health - "**having nourishment ministered**". Here once more is the brain at work for the well-being of the body, knowing how to control the nutriment supplied, and to turn it into life-force for the whole frame.

Take one New Testament instance of the remarkable way in which the Head ministers to the nourishment of the Soul. Two debilitated men, their spiritual vitality undermined by grief, are dragging their feet along the road to their village home. Presently we find them on the same road; but what has happened that this time, with hurrying footsteps, and uplifted spirits, they hasten back to Jerusalem? Simply that the Head has ministered the nourishment that has renewed their spirit and energy: by the Word - "**did not our heart burn within us . . . while He opened to us the Scriptures?**" Luke 24:32; and by the Ordinance - "**He was known of them in breaking of bread**". verse 35.

In His Word and at His Table, and through other means of grace, He is ever wont to bring

strength to our spiritual being - strength for service, strength for health. and further -:

The Secret of our Growth - "**increaseth with the increase of GOD**". Our bodies will not grow big and strong if we do not faithfully follow the dictates of the brain.

Perhaps our apostle has observed that some of these Colossian Christians are shewing signs of developing into poor-hearted, small-minded, weak-kneed, flabby-muscled, thinbodied, lame-limbed believers - all because, not holding to the Head, they have suffered their strength to be sapped by some insidious heresy.

How different from the thrilling summons of Isaiah 35:3-4. "**Strengthen ye the weak hands, confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your GOD . . .**"

Here is the fine, adventurous virility of the healthy, godly life. Be it noted, then, that spiritual invalidism results from "**not holding the Head**"; but that spiritual invigoration comes from "**beholding your GOD**". "**They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.**" Isaiah 40:31.

What a pity it is that any of us Christians should, through the enervating atmosphere of any heretical belief. allow ourselves to sink into spiritual mediocrity, when we might be enjoying the vigours of GOD's full salvation.

"Love's resistless current sweeping
All the regions deep within;
Thought, and wish. and senses keeping
Now, and every instant, clean:
Full salvation!
From the guilt and power of sin,"

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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