

Faith or Philosophy: Safeguards Against Deception **Colossians 2:1-10**

On March 1, 1932, Charles Lindbergh's 20-month old son, Charles Jr. was kidnapped from his second-floor nursery at the Lindbergh's home near Hopewell, New Jersey. Lindbergh and his wife Anne discovered a ransom note on the nursery windowsill demanding \$50,000. A few days later a new ransom note turned up, demanding \$70,000. When the Lindberghs delivered the money, they were told their baby could be found on a boat named "Nellie," off the coast of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. After an exhaustive search there was no sign of the toddler or the boat. A truck driver found the Lindbergh baby's body on May 12, 1932, about four miles from the Lindbergh home in New Jersey.

All declared that it was a tragedy for the Lindbergh family and for the nation. While that is true a far greater tragedy is for a believer who is indwelt by the HS, who is complete in Christ to be deceived and kidnapped by false doctrine. That is what is at stake in Col.2.

The church in Colossae, like the church today is in danger of being infiltrated by false teaching and led astray – kidnapped if you will. Throughout history the church has fought to maintain its doctrinal purity. This was Paul's great concern here in chapter 2 and actually throughout the book of Colossians – a letter written to affirm their faith and to encourage them to stay on the biblical path and not get led astray. While the whole chapter is devoted to this issue of avoiding being kidnapped we are going to look at vs.1-10 where Paul focuses in on safeguards that keep a believer safe and on course. I see 4 safeguards for the church and each believer.

I. A Strong Heart Bound by Christ's Love Col.2:1-2a

Paul begins this chapter where he ended chapter 1 with the focus on "struggle" (*agonizomai*) – exerting maximum effort. His goal as stated in 1:28 was to proclaim Christ in such a way that his teaching, admonishment and wisdom would bring every believer into greater maturity in Christ. While the Colossian heretics believed that "perfection", real knowledge was only for the elite, Paul wanted the church to know that real knowledge and maturity was for every believer.

He was so focused on that he used the word "striving" in vs.29 which is the Greek word *agonizomai* which refers to competing in an athletic event and from which we get the English word "agonize" – exerting maximum effort.

Please note that the maximum effort Paul is exerting is not in his own strength but in the might which God supplies which is in answer to Paul's prayer in 1:11.

He picks up that idea in 2:1 when he uses the same Greek word *agon* to describe his commitment and effort on behalf of these believers – believers he had never met. It would be better if there were no chapter break here because he is in essence continuing the thought from 1:28-29

John MacArthur was so captured by this thought he made this comment: *Paul's desire for the church that come pouring out of his love for people he's never even seen, for a people he's never even met. But that didn't matter, because you see – now mark this – his love for the church was not predicated on the people in it, it was predicated on the Christ who died for it.*

Chapter 4 reminds us that he was not alone as Epaphras who was their pastor who came and reported to Paul, he had the same thing – 4:12. Here’s the same spirit, the same attitude, another man with an aching heart for the spiritual life of a people of God.

MacArthur’s conclusion is that the most important quality a minister can possess is love for the church. Paul and Epaphras had that love and therefore strove to develop, teach, encourage and build the believers at Colossae as well as those in the surrounding area.

His first safeguard against being deceived and led astray is “a strong heart”. He uses the Greek word *parakaleo* which is literally “to call alongside” and most often translated “encourage or comfort”. It’s the word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit – Paraclete or Comforter. And while the most common translation is comfort or encourage it can also mean “strengthen”. And because the Colossians were beset with false teachers they needed strengthening rather than comfort. This strength comes because they are already knit together in love.

In verse 9 they are “rooted” in Christ, planted there if you will, but here as believers we are also by virtue of our faith in Christ “knit together in love”. The word “knit together” (*sumbibazo*) means to unite or bring together.

You all know that Linda is a seamstress. She used to make a lot of costumes for the girls school plays as well as for JIC. When she starts out there are pieces and bolts of fabric – material everywhere. It looks like a mess, but there is a goal in mind and once the pieces of fabric are sown together the result is abundant beauty – a masterpiece if you will.

So the church is a masterpiece of God’s creation (Eph.2:10) knit together by his love which causes us to love one another – (3:14). Believers share a common life with love as its basis. All believers possess the same eternal life, all come to Christ in the same way (by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone), and all are placed into the Body of Christ by the same Spirit. The “one another” ideas all flow out of this idea. Together we are safe. Safety in numbers if you will. Safeguard #1 a strong heart bound by Christ’s love.

II. Strong Assurance Based on Knowing Jesus Colossians 2:2b-5

The phrase “and that” in the middle of verse 2 reflects the second goal of Paul’s striving and struggle for the Colossians—the first is “encouragement” and the second is “full assurance.”

However the Greek phrase is difficult to put into English hence all the words in italics in English translations which are an attempt to give a complete sentence. Literally it reads “into all riches of full assurance of understanding in knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ”. I like the way the NET Bible states it “*that they may have all the riches that assurance brings in their understanding of the knowledge of the mystery of God, namely Christ*”.

Without assurance we can’t enjoy the blessings that are ours in Christ. For example, we can’t look forward with hope to the blessings of heaven if we doubt if we are going there. But we abound in hope when we are fully assured of our security in Christ.

So Paul is telling us that with the understanding of truth, specifically who Christ is, comes assurance in abundance. It is the riches that assurance brings.

Note that this assurance is based on understanding. Understanding refers to the ability to apply what I know. If I understand how to do something and I do it then I have full assurance that understanding brings.

Back in 1978 I installed wallpaper for the first time. When I started I thought I could hang wallpaper for I had seen it done and I had some information from a former wallpaper hanger and I had the tools and supplies. However I had very little assurance of my ability. I thought I could but I wasn't sure. By applying what I knew, even though limited, I developed great assurance. So much so that soon after that I started my own wallpapering business.

That is the type of assurance Paul is referring to in this verse – the assurance, the wealth of assurance that comes from understanding – from applying what I know about Jesus. As I apply those truths I gain assurance and as I gain assurance I gain conviction regarding the true knowledge of who Jesus is, and those convictions are a safeguard against deception.

Paul uses the word “mystery” and I know that Rocky has already given you a list of the “mysteries” in the NT and I know that you know that a mystery is truth once hidden but now revealed so I am not going to cover that in detail but I do want to focus on the mystery here.

This is the “*mystery of God, namely Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*” The mystery is that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh who is the storehouse of all wisdom and knowledge. He expounds a little further on this in vs.9 – *in him (Christ) all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.*

In chapter 1 the mystery was that this Christ in you (Gentiles), the hope of glory. Here the mystery is Christ Incarnate – fully God and fully man. The mystery here is of God himself. The hidden God appeared in Christ—he reveals him; he explains the mystery. Therefore, if the question is, what is God like? The answer is, Christ.

Return to 1:15. Jesus is the visible expression of the invisible God and the exact representation of his nature. He and the Father are one. This was a truth formerly hidden but now revealed – Jesus is fully God in the flesh.

I suspect if I asked you if you believe that Jesus is fully God you would answer “Yes”. So let me ask another question: If this Christ is in you (1:27) and this Christ is fully God (2:2, 9) do we live as if he were the one in whom all spiritual sufficiency resides? What might that look like in practice? If we believed that Jesus was fully God and lived in us we would first pray 1:9-11 and expect to see the results of that prayer in our lives – conduct honoring Jesus, pleasing him, positively impacting others, knowing God, being faithful, patient and joyful.

In all of Scripture there is no clearer declaration and explanation of the deity, supremacy and sufficiency of Christ than in the first 2 chapters of Colossians. It is this understanding that is a crucial safeguard against apostasy and deception.

Note the statement Paul makes in vs.3. Hidden is from *apokruphos* from which we get the English “apocrypha”. It was used by those outside the church to refer to writings containing their secret knowledge. Paul meets the heretics on their own ground. He has a secret, too. It is a revealed secret – Christ himself. There is no higher spiritual knowledge than that found in Christ. All wisdom and knowledge is “hidden” in Christ meaning that he is the storehouse of all wisdom and knowledge. He alone is sufficient. There is no need for the writings of any cult or philosophy to gain greater spiritual heights. Christ alone is sufficient.

The reason Paul is so focused on the sufficiency of Christ is so that the believers would not be “deluded with persuasive arguments” – vs.4.

To delude is to deceive by false reasoning. How about I prove you are not here? Are we in Houston? Are we in San Antonio? If we are not in Houston and we are not in San Antonio then we must be somewhere else. If we are somewhere else we can’t be here.

Sometimes we think that hearing about something is sufficient to be able to do it. So if I listen to Scottie Scheffler talk about how to play golf and then even watch him I think I can play golf. I may know something about golf but I don’t know how to play golf. To do that I need to actually play. So in the Christian life simply hearing about Jesus is insufficient for spiritual maturity. To grow I need to put into practice what I know – James 1:22.

Persuasive speech is that which is outwardly appealing, plausible. When you hear a convincing argument that you need a special gift (speaking in tongues, etc) or a 2nd blessing to be spiritual don’t be deceived. You have everything you need in Christ. He will build on that in vs.9-10.

Paul’s point is that even though the arguments seem to make sense (sound reasonable), they are in the end false. While they could be deceived by these persuasive arguments as of yet they have not – vs.5. Even though Paul was not present he was with them in spirit and had heard about their “good discipline and stable faith”.

These 2 concepts are actually military terms: good discipline (*taxis*) refers to a line of soldiers drawn up for battle, whereas stability (*stereoma*) refers to the solidarity of a formation of soldiers. Taken together they express Paul’s joy that individually and collectively the Colossians were standing firm against the attacks of false teaching.

How were they able to do that? They had a strong heart bound by love (1:4, 8) and second they had a full assurance based on knowing who Jesus is (1:5-6). Therefore, here is the application of the first 2 safeguards, stay faithful – 2:6-7. This is the 3rd safeguard against deception.

III. Strong Walk of Faith Colossians 2:6-7

As you have received Christ Jesus as Lord so walk... Our daily conduct is to mirror our coming to Christ. When we came to faith in Christ we accepted his death on our behalf, we believed that what he did was sufficient to pay for our sins and forgive us. One writer stated that we submitted to his right to be our Savior. Now we are to continue to walk by faith and submission to him.

Christ has the right to rule. So to walk with Christ is to come to any and every situation willingly recognizing that Christ has the authority to shape our lives.

All our life is to be joyfully dominated by Christ as we submit to his rightful lordship. One of the reasons we struggle with that is we haven't fully comprehended the deity of Christ or that he is the storehouse of wisdom and knowledge. He has all the wisdom (insight as to how we are to live) and knowledge (the insight to apply it) we need.

Walking with Jesus is the admonition and the reason we can actually walk with Jesus is stated in vs.7. First we are already "firmly rooted" in Christ. The word is in the perfect tense and literally means "having been firmly planted". We are like a tree where Christ has become the source of our spiritual nourishment, growth and fruit.

He changes the metaphor to a house - we are now being built up in him. Being built up is a present tense participle and translated "being built up" indicating a continuous action.

By virtue of this ongoing continual process we are established in the faith. This verb is in the passive tense indicating that we are acted upon by an outside force. God is the one who establishes believers. In all 3 cases we are not the ones acting. We have already been or are being acted upon. We are (fact) firmly rooted, in the process (ongoing) of being built and established.

The last of the 4 participles in this verse is the only one in the active voice. It is a response to the other 3. Because we are firmly rooted in Christ, and being built up in Him and established in the faith we will overflow with gratitude to God.

Have you noticed how often thanks or gratitude show up in this short letter? 1:3, 11, 24; 2:7; 3:15, 16, 17; 4:2.

John MacArthur: *Praise completes the circle in which the blessings that flow to us from God return to him in the form of our praise and adoration...* (pg. 93 MacArthur Commentary Colossians and Philemon).

There is one more safeguard against deception and that is found in vs.8-10.

IV. Strong Aversion to Danger Colossians 2:8-10

"*See to it*" – be on your guard, beware. Paul calls for constant watchfulness to avoid being kidnapped (take captive). If you and I are not alert to the danger we could end up in bondage to ritual, tradition, philosophy, legalism, mysticism or some other error.

Jesus himself warns us to "beware of the false prophets who come in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" Matt.7:15. Paul warns the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-31 of "savage wolves who will come among you and draw away disciples after them". Peter writes in 2 Pet.3:1 *...be on you guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness.*

The word Paul uses here in Col.2:8 is so rare that this is the only time it is used both in Scripture and extrabiblical Greek. *Sulagogeo* is a compound word that means to carry off as booty or the spoil of war; to kidnap.

The means by which the false teachers will use to attempt to kidnap believers is “philosophy and empty deception”. Philosophy by itself simply means “to love wisdom” so Paul is not against philosophy. What he has in mind is philosophy or so called wisdom that has theories about God, the world, the meaning of life and the afterlife that leave God and Scripture out of the equation. This would include those in Colossae who promised higher knowledge or mystical experience.

This type of philosophy was characterized by “empty deception”. It promised what it could not deliver. The philosophy of the Colossian false teachers sounded good but it seduced the mind and in the end was an illusion. It relied on human reason with spiritual words thrown in. It is those who promised what Christ had already given – 2:4.

Herbert Carson in his commentary states: *While the Christian may see a certain negative value in speculative philosophy, he will constantly be on his guard lest he come to study revelation, not as a believer, but as a humanist...he is willing to be taught by the Holy Spirit and acknowledges that it is the Word of God rather than his own reason which is the final arbiter.* (pg.62)

Paul goes on to give 2 sources for this type of empty deception. The first is “the tradition of men”. Tradition in and of itself is not empty and at times it is encouraged – 2 Thess.2:15 and 3:6. But in many cases tradition is simply something passed from one to another and simply because it is handed down through the years doesn’t make it true. Jesus and the Pharisees had a number of dialogues concerning tradition over Scripture – Mark 7:5-9. “We’ve always done it that way” is not the best mantra to live by.

A second source for this false philosophy is “the elementary principles of the world”. It is difficult to determine the exact meaning of this phrase. *Stoicheia* refers primarily to the letters of the alphabet – what we might call the ABC’s. Paul might be describing the false teaching as simplistic, elementary. To accept would be to regress and not progress. The writer to the Hebrews uses a similar phrase in Heb.6:1 – “leaving the elementary teaching”. Gal.4:3 speaks of children held in bondage to the elemental things of the world.

Another possible meaning for “elementary principles”, though less likely is that it refers to elemental spirits – spirit beings that the people of the ancient world associated with the stars and planets. Astrology is not new.

The best way to avoid danger when it comes to false teaching is to focus on Jesus *for in him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form and in him you have been made complete...* Teaching that is beneficial to us is to be Christ centered; Christ focused and Christ controlled. This takes us back to 1:15-22. It is absolutely crucial to know who Jesus is and what he accomplished – reconciliation. It is only then we avoid being deceived and kidnapped.

Vs.9 is perhaps the most definitive statement of Christ's deity in the epistles. MacArthur calls it *the rock upon which all attempts to disprove Christ's deity are shattered*.

Fullness is *pleroma* the same word used in 1:19 - the full number that makes up the whole or simply put totality. All the fullness of deity dwells in Christ. Not a part but the whole.

To dwell is *katoikeo* and means to live, to settle down and be at home. It is in the present tense indicating that the essence of deity continually abides at home in Christ. The nature of God that continually abides in Christ is not some divine light that came upon him for awhile but is permanent and forever. Jesus is fully God forever. He was fully God prior to the incarnation. He was fully God during the incarnation (God took on flesh and dwelt among us). He is fully God in glory.

And here is where it gets mind boggling. Because of who Christ is (fully God) we have been made complete in Him – vs.10. His fullness has been imparted to us. Christ is the *pleroma* (fullness) of God, and we have been filled with his *pleroma* (fullness). Hence we are complete in Christ. John writes in 1:16 *For of his fullness we have all received*. Here in Col.2:10 the participle “having been made complete” is in the perfect tense. That means the results of having been filled are eternal.

For the false teachers in Colossae to claim that those who are complete in Christ still lacked some experience, knowledge or mystical activity is absurd. Peter puts it this way in 2 Pet.1:4 “we have become partakers of the divine nature”. In the previous Peter noted that we have everything pertaining to life and godliness so if we have everything we therefore lack nothing. All believers are complete in Christ and do not need the teachings of any cult or false teacher. Nothing can be added to who you are in Christ. As a believer, born into the family of God you are complete. Spiritual growth comes not by addition but by nutrition.

Think of it like a new born baby. When a baby is born he or she has all that they will ever have. You don't grow up and get arms at age 5. You don't add parts to a baby. The parts of the baby grow by nutrition and exercise. The same is true spiritually. When you come to faith in Christ you are complete and you grow by nutrition and exercise.

How is it possible for one not to get sucked in by philosophy which is subtly deceitful in its language, logically compelling within its system of reason and enticingly moral? The only answer is the fullness of Christ.

We must also understand that the fullness meets our individual needs. He gives us what the moment requires: wisdom, strength, courage. We experience his fullness as we continue in faith.

Conclusion

This is a rich text full culminating in our being complete in Christ. I've taken the approach that there are 4 safeguards in this text that will enable us to avoid being deceived. 1st – Strong hearts bound by Christ's love; 2nd – Strong assurance based on knowing Jesus; 3rd – Strong walk of faith and 4th – Strong aversion of danger.