



Colossians 2:4–5

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Reflection

Reading the New Testament letters at one level is like reading another person's mail.

Despite the accidental nature of history that has seen some historical information passed down to us, with the distance of now two thousand years, we can't be privy to the specific historical situation of the recipients of the letters of the New Testament. In truth, all that we can reliably know about the historical situation of the Colossian church, for example, is what we can glean from their mail, in this case, Paul's letter to them that we are studying. This process is commonly known as 'mirror reading'; trying to reconstruct the situation in Colosse based on the detail of Paul's letter to them, which, to a greater or lesser degree, we can then supplement with any other historical data that has reasonably reliably come down to us through history.

Today's passage is a bit of a red flag, in that it provides us a window into what might have been going on in Colosse, and perhaps Paul's reason for writing his letter to them. I'll read the passage now, and then we'll attempt to reconstruct what was happening in Colosse through a mirror reading of chapter 2 in particular. But firstly, today's passage, Colossians 2:4–5,

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Paul doesn't explicitly tell us what prompted him to write to the Colossians but to-

day's passage, and similar references dotted throughout chapter two in particular give us, I think, a fair idea. In today's passage Paul warns them about 'not being deceived by fine sounding arguments' and about those who would take others 'captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy' in verse 8, and those who are 'judging others' (verse 16) and 'disqualifying them' (verse 18). On the flipside, as we continue our mirror reading, Paul encourages the Colossians to maintain their disciplined and firm faith (2:5), and to hold onto the good teaching that they have received (verses 7 & 8). And of course, we've already seen Paul return time and time again to the power and the importance of the gospel which he will continue to do throughout the letter (e.g. 1:5–8, 23, 29; 2:2; 3:1-2, 16). So on the basis of our mirror

reading, from the one side of the conversation that we possess, it is safe to assume that the Colossian church was subject to some form of false teaching which was threatening to lead them astray. It's likely that the danger was real enough to cause Epaphras, or Philemon, or another Colossian elder to reach out to Paul so that he could write to them as a corrective. And as a result we have Paul's magisterial letter to the Colossians. In chapter two, Paul begins to confront these false teacher's head-on, beginning in today's passage.

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If you re-read chapter one, Paul's spent the first quarter of his letter establishing

his authority to say what he's about to say in chapter two. He's shared with them intimate details of his prayer life on their behalf, his relentless personal ministry, his goals for all the churches that he's planted and most importantly some of the most sublime teaching about Jesus Christ in all of Scripture; all the while reminding them of the extraordinary transformation that the gospel of Jesus Christ has wrought in their pagan community. And in doing so, Paul has built up his credibility and authority to say what's about to follow in chapter 2,

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Paul may be absent in the body, but he and they share in the one Spirit, the Spir-

it of Jesus Christ, and because of that, Paul's heart is with this young church as well. From afar and through his unrelenting prayer life Paul is contending with them and for them, as verse 5 continues,

5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

With these words Paul is at once cheering them on and at the same time encouraging them to remain disciplined and firm in the faith so that they might not be deceived by fine-sounding arguments. Instead, Paul's hope no doubt is for them to return time and time again to his teaching about Jesus Christ in the letter that he is

sending them.

And we would do well to do the same. The modern world is filled with fine-sounding arguments that lead us away from Christ. Ours is the age of mass media and communication. The thought of a long-distance conversation on a rolled up papyrus scroll written in fading ink, read aloud to a group of people many of whom could not even read, seems impossibly removed from the internet age in which we live where fine-sounding arguments abound. Which means Paul's words carried by the Holy Spirit across two thousand years ring out more strongly than ever,

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The reality of modern life and in particular Western culture is that everything preaches to us, from the posters on the back of the bus, to the lyrics of almost every song ever written now virtually free on music streaming services, to the celebrities or business leaders or motivational speakers that we follow on YouTube; every waking moment filled with a message, a product, a desire, in the fast-moving cultural torrent of the modern world. ‘Beware’, says Paul. ‘Don’t be deceived’. Slow down, think deeply, and return again and again to the source, the Scriptures that preach to us the gospel of Jesus Christ in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Return time and time again to his Word so that no-one may deceive you with hollow and deceptive philoso-

phies or fine-sounding arguments. Block out the white noise and distractions of our culture, be knit together in brotherly and sisterly love, delight daily in the riches of Christian community and in the Scriptures that continually point to the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and there will be a deep, and growing knowledge of Christ, and a love amongst you that will insulate you from whatever false teaching modern life may send our way.

Think & Pray

Pause this morning to do some heart work. It's never easy to do. Try and peer into the thoughts and motivations of your heart, the direction of your loves. What are you aspiring to? What do you find yourself daydreaming of in your spare moments?

What have you consciously or otherwise set your heart's desire on? And when you attain it, how is it that you expect you'll feel and be? Perhaps it's a person. Perhaps it's a promotion. Perhaps it's a mortgage. Are you being deceived by a fine-sounding argument? I'll be happy when ... I'll have made it when ... She'll love me then ...

The human heart is in need of continual recalibration back to Christ. And this happens through Scripture, the power of the Holy Spirit and prayer. Why not re-read Colossians 1:15-2:4 for yourself now? Read it slowly and give yourself completely over to the contemplation of these words of Scripture. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and to apply them to your heart. And as you do, pray that he might recalibrate the deepest desires and longings of your heart away

from the pursuits of this world and to the full riches of complete understanding and the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are only found in Jesus.