

Being full persons in a superficial world

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[0 : 00] We're going to read today's Bible passage now from Colossians chapter 2, starting at verse 6 and through to verse 23 at the end of the chapter.

So starting at Colossians chapter 2, verse 6. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to the human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been fulfilled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

And you who were dead in the trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

[1 : 29] This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities, and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him.

Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the head from which the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and teachings.

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they have no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

[2 : 50] Well, good morning, everyone. Question to get you thinking this morning. Is Australian culture, do you think, less religious, less spiritually shaped than it was, say, 50 or 100 years ago?

Is it more anti-Christian? Now, I suspect, seeing the responses of some of you, you might be thinking to yourself, is he serious?

Of course it's much less religious. Not only is it less religious, but it's aggressively anti-religious and specifically anti-Christian.

And you can understand that because hardly a day passes without hearing on the news or on papers or wherever you get your news feeds from. Hardly a day passes without somebody claiming that religion is always the problem.

It's never the solution. It's a bit of a catch cry almost. A go-to position for so many so quickly. Well, you know, in spite of all that, I would argue that the cultural air we breathe in Australia is more religious than it's been in the past.

[4 : 10] It's more spiritually shaped than it has ever been, I would argue. And that's true even as it increasingly and aggressively rejects historic Bible-based Christianity.

So, Christianity is on the nose. Bible-based Christianity is on the nose. But that doesn't make us any less religious as a nation. In fact, I think we're more religious.

So, a little bit, if you come with me in a little bit of a word study. The word religion comes from the Latin word re-ligari. It's printed in your outline there, if you can't pick up my accent.

And the word re-ligari means to rebind, to tie back together something that's become disconnected, separated. And the reason why you re-ligari is so it becomes complete and healthy again.

It restores well-being. And in the middle of that word re-ligari is the word that we get the word ligament from. A ligament is a strong sinew that holds bonds together to give our skeletons structure and integrity.

[5 : 25] So, religion, therefore, is a person's search for reconnection into our universe in a way that's meaningful.

It gives purpose, meaning. It gives ultimate well-being. And it gives completeness as a person. So, using that definition of religion, hopefully you're starting to think, Oh, actually, I can see that now.

People are very religious. That's very much a front of mind task for people. Most commonly, it's a search to connect the human and the divine.

So that a person can die without fear of being rejected by God. But it's not always like that. Some people refuse to admit or even countenance the idea of a supreme being that we would call God.

But even they create their own form of religion. Because they also are on the search for meaning and purpose and well-being and completeness.

[6 : 36] They might reject any notion of a supreme being, but they're going to create their own form of religion. And that religion might well be a passion for science. That's where I find my meaning and purpose and well-being.

Or it might be shopping. You can see all around Australia today, people are in the temples worshipping with a passion. The shopping centres. It could be travel.

It could be sex. It could be volunteering. It could be animal and human rights causes. It could be social media, self-promotion, so you make yourself your God and worship yourself. Or it could be a thousand other things.

But they're all religions in the sense that people are passionately committed to them and engaged in them because they hope that those things will deliver meaning and purpose and a sense of well-being and completeness in life.

But many still, of course, look to supernatural beings. They might reject the God of the Bible, but they still look to a host of supernatural beings.

[7 : 42] Some of them are just fanciful. But people want a beating heart at the centre of our universe. They don't want just a mechanistic world, the world of science.

They want something warm, relational. And so they reject the God of the Bible, but they're still looking for some sort of supreme being out there that they can relate to. And, of course, that's how long is a piece of string once you start to go down that rabbit hole.

But whatever form it takes, I would also suggest this. That at a practical level, self-made religion is like a bucket full of holes.

It leaks. And it constantly needs to be topped up. And I think that describes and explains why our society is so restless, so discontent, so constantly focused and absorbed and expending our energy in the new experience.

That thing that's going to be better and better replaces that which has been in the past. People always looking and needing for a top-up, some new expression, some new affirmation of meaning and purpose.

[9 : 06] Because the bucket we put our hopes in leaks. And leaks badly. And into this smorgasbord or buffet approach to life where people grab a bit of this and a bit of that in the search for completeness or authenticity, finding true self, whatever that is, into that we see in sharp contrast to it, God's gospel message.

Which is that Jesus is the person every person is looking for. Jesus is the ligament which connects us back into relationship with God and delivers the meaning and purpose and the well-being and the completeness that we're all searching for in one form or another.

But I need to add quickly here, the gospel is not another religion. That's the uniqueness of the gospel. It's not about what people do for God or to try and allay our fear for God by things we do.

No, the gospel is about what God does for us. It's the total opposite of religion. It's about what God has done for me and continues to do in me through Jesus.

And the gospel says, and we'll see it now as we jump into Colossians, the gospel said that God in Jesus has done everything needed for me and you and anybody else in this world to reconnect to God perfectly and forever.

[10 : 55] The gospel of Jesus, therefore, is a full bucket full to the brim with no leaks, no holes.

We respond simply by living in the light of his promise and grace. And that's what Paul wants these believers at Colossae to understand. And so throughout his letter, and we're well into it now, throughout his letter, he's just saying this one thing over and over again.

I've used the illustration of a diamond with all the facets in a diamond. There's one gospel diamond Paul wants us to understand. But as he goes through, his repetition isn't complete. He just turns the diamond each time he goes through the cycle and another facet of the gospel shines and glitters and strikes us.

And we see the same as we jump into verse 6 of chapter 2 where Paul says, therefore, so that's a summary based on what I've already said, says Paul. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him or so live in him.

Now, we've seen this pattern right through. Paul starts with what is already true based on the past, what God has already done for them in Christ. And on the basis of that, then he says, this is what it means for now and for the future, for how you live.

[12 : 22] Their walk or their daily lifestyle now and into the future, says Paul, ought to be in total sync with the beginnings of your spiritual walk, your spiritual life.

When you became a believer in Jesus, that very, the very same things that are important then ought now to be the things that are important in your daily life.

It was grace and faith back then, grace and faith now and into the future. Taking God at his word back then, believing as promises of forgiveness and renewal from the inside out.

That's how you became a Christian. That's what it is to live as a Christian. And verse 7, Paul uses two metaphors or two picture words to make us point powerfully.

The first one is rooted in Christ. It's an agricultural picture. In other words, in the past, says Paul, by God's grace and through Jesus' death and resurrection, you were organically joined to Jesus as inseparably as roots are to a tree.

[13 : 49] The secret of thriving now is knowing that you're rooted in Jesus and he is the source of life and vitality. And then the second metaphor is built up in him.

It's a construction metaphor. In the past, Jesus became the foundation. When they became Christians, Jesus became their foundation upon which they now rest and the superstructure, which is the house, is emerging, is building and growing.

And of course, we know that the shape of the foundations ultimately shape and define the building that grows on them or is put on them. And then Paul goes on and says, established in the faith just as you were taught.

Again, he's pulling those two picture words together and he's saying, look, everything you are as a believer, everything you are as a believer was actually settled in the past when you became a believer.

when you first heard and responded to the truth of the gospel and remember back in chapter 1, that truth was presented to them by Epaphras and Paul's now affirming and standing alongside Epaphras and said, yeah, there only is one gospel truth.

[15 : 12] Epaphras told you, I'm telling you again. and that includes both the unseen spiritual realities of being organically connected to Christ and the visible practical outworking of that reality in this daily life as the building emerges and grows.

Everything is in Jesus. All of God's grace, all of God's renewing power to them in Jesus, prompted them, the last verse 7, to abound or the word is overflow.

Same idea. Well, the word's abound but the picture is overflow, sorry. It just, when you grasp this, says Paul, you yourselves know the response.

You just overflow with thanksgiving. You recognize you're enjoying the fullness or the completeness which is yours in and through Jesus.

Your saviour and your lord and thanks and thanksgiving is just the natural response. God has done it for you. You've received it as a gift.

[16 : 26] Wow. So Jesus was their complete saviour. So they can now say, our reality as believers is that we are in Christ.

His work for them in his death and resurrection was totally sufficient. Totally sufficient as we've seen in past weeks to transfer them from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his light, of his son in light and life.

To qualify them now to have an inheritance with Christ in heaven. That's how sufficient the work of Jesus was. Totally sufficient for everything they need to be back in perfect forever relationship with God.

He was their complete saviour. But also, going back to chapter 1, he was their absolute lord. So that they could say as we saw last week, not only am I in Christ, but Christ is in me.

In other words, Jesus has taken up residence in his renewed people. Marie demonstrated it wonderfully there with colour and water this morning.

[17 : 45] Jesus has taken up residence in his renewed people through his Holy Spirit so that his saved people are forever united with Christ. And that union with Christ is so complete that as we saw in past weeks, God now views us as being like Christ and promises that when we finally get to be home with Christ, we will be completely like Christ and free from every vestige of sin.

Now, I just want to pause there for a moment because those two things have to go together. If we said that Christ's death was sufficient for everything we needed, but wasn't applied to us and guaranteed to us by union with Christ, then the sufficiency of Christ would not give us any great comfort or security.

We need them both. If, on the other hand, we said, well, we've got union with Christ, but then there's a question over how sufficient and how complete Christ's death was to deal with sin and restore us to a relationship with God, then there would also be uncertainty for us.

But you see, we've got both. We're united with Christ whose death was totally sufficient for us, Saviour and Lord, the complete package or fullness in him, as the verses 9 and 10 say.

Paul's emphasis could not be stronger. And the practical outworking of that is, as you began, as you have begun your new life in Jesus in the past, so you're to continue to grow in Jesus.

[19 : 37] You began with Jesus, grace and faith. You continue with Jesus, grace and faith. Now, as believers, I think we're often guilty of focusing more on becoming a Christian, focusing on Jesus as Saviour rather than on continuing in Christ, demonstrating Jesus as Lord.

I think we actually, for various reasons, which I don't have time to get into this morning, we actually might like the notion of Saviour because of what it offers us more than the concept of Lord, which demands of us.

But the two are inseparable. Paul won't allow a separation. Becoming a believer, complete Saviour, is not the end of the road, it's just the start of the road of living under the absolute Lord.

And that leads us into the second question. Each week in this series we've been repeating a question, a second question. What prevents us from experiencing fullness fullness or completeness in Christ?

Well, each week we've seen the answer is actually relatively simple to understand. A bit more tricky to apply in our lives, but simple to understand. Given what Paul said in 6 and 7, the answer has to be not living, what prevents us from experiencing fullness?

[21 : 31] Well, not living in the light of who we are in Jesus. not utilizing the resources which are already ours by virtue of being in Christ and Christ in us.

But positively, the life of faith is staying totally focused on Jesus for our fullness and completeness.

in other words, keeping clear in our mind that the bucket we have, the gospel bucket of Jesus is full to the brim and doesn't leak.

we don't need to add something to Jesus.

We don't need to wander off down some other path which seems to be the case in Colossae where there was some group saying, well look, no you need a new and better experience. Well Jesus was great to start with, but somehow you need to move beyond that to a deeper experience, perhaps a separate experience, a second experience.

[22 : 46] Paul says, no, your bucket's already full. And here's the problem we see.

If with this picture language the bucket's already full because of what Jesus has done for us and is doing in us, then as we try to add something to that bucket we actually displace something that's already in it.

So if we try and add something to the gospel bucket of what Jesus has done for us and continues to do in us, then we're actually displacing some aspect of what Jesus has already done or is doing in us, which is essentially to trash the gospel.

Diminish God's gospel. And Paul warned against this in verses 8 through 23. And a lot of this is illustrative, so I'm going to cover it very, very quick.

Well, do I do anything very quickly, you say. I'm going to try and cover it as quickly as I can. As we've said over the last few weeks, as Christians, I've said that to myself more recently.

[24 : 00] I have to keep remembering to preach the gospel to myself because I forget it. I forget the basics. How quickly do I forget the basics and how extremely do I forget the basics?

And that's what Paul's doing in these verses 8 through to 23. So I'm turning into a couple of questions. 8 through to 15. Who captivates your walk or your life?

If you look at verse 8, Paul says, say to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ.

Whose pathway are you walking? Paul gives us only two options here. Either you're walking in the light of who you already are in Christ, filled to the brim, totally filled, satisfied and focused on Jesus' promises, or you're cutting your own pathway according to tradition and the things of the world.

Pretty stark options, aren't they? either we're wandering along, trusting our own wisdom, and of course, if you've done any bushwalking, Alice and I, even when we were last holidays, we were chatting away and we were walking and suddenly I realized we were following an animal track.

[25 : 43] It wasn't a form track at all. We were just wandering, trusting Alison's wisdom. And I suddenly realized she'd got me lost, even though I was in front.

You can do that when you're Irish. It's follow me, I'll be right behind you. That works when you're Irish. You just get more and more lost, and when you're wandering, you don't even realize how lost you are.

Or, allowing ourselves to be deceived, we can be taken captive by some other interesting or convincing religious notion about where to find an authentic, satisfying life.

It's crazy when Paul puts the options like that. Verses 9 and 10. It's crazy to try to cut your own pathway to God because we already have fullness.

We already share his character. We already share in all he has done for us. We already share in all he has won for us, including victory over the guilt and power of sin and demonic forces who would try and make us take our eyes off Jesus and put them onto our daily sin and failures.

[27 : 07] With the object of that being that we live in fear that our sin will keep us from God and we'll experience God's ultimate rejection. Look at verses 9 and 10.

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority.

In him, oh that's, yeah, alright, there you go. Again, it would be crazy to cut your own pathway trying to create for yourself, trying to fill the bucket for yourself when Jesus said, hey, I've already given you a bucket, so it's full to the brim.

Verse 11, 12. The imagery here gets a little bit more complicated at first glance, but I think I'm going to take a very simple line to cut through it. it's crazy to try and cut your own pathway to God, because in Jesus we already have the closest form of identity and relationship and being set apart.

We've already been, as the text here says, circumcised spiritually. Paul says, in him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ.

[28 : 33] having been buried with him in baptism, in which you are also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. Circumcision for God's people before Jesus was the visible mark of being God's specially loved and accepted person, being in God's community and safe.

life. Well, Paul's saying, look, why would you cut your own pathway to safety and identity when you have it in Christ already? Verses 12 through to 15.

Again, they pick up the baptism thing in verse 12. and you who were dead in your trespasses and sin and the uncircumcision of your flesh. God made alive together with him have forgiven us all our trespasses, all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him.

It's crazy to try and cut your own pathway to God because in Christ all need for religious activity in the hope of making yourself acceptable to God is removed.

[30 : 07] Why would you go down the rabbit hole of some sort of religious activity? Things I do, things I say, places I go, festivals I keep, when Jesus has done it all for you on the cross.

We don't need to do more because his death is sufficient. We just need to accept and understand and live in the light of.

Baptism was a picture of identification and renewal. The person goes down into the water, it's a picture of being washed or even more extreme dying as you go into the water.

The end of this particular orientation of life. Then you come back up out of the water and it's a picture of newness of life or an orientation no longer connected to the old life. The two have been completely separated.

You've moved from one arena to the other. That's what we already have in the gospel. Move from the domain of darkness and the guilt of sin and the accusation that would rightly have been leveled against us.

[31 : 15] You've got a big problem before God. Now in Jesus, no accusation. I don't have a problem in God because Jesus has dealt with it. We've got complete identification with God.

Total disconnect from our old life of rebellion. Completely new identification, new orientation, new life in and for God. My friends, the bucket's full.

There's nothing else we can add without displacing something that Jesus already put there. So keep your eyes on Jesus.

Follow his footprints. don't get yourself lost wandering around. Trusting your own wisdom is better than what Jesus already said to you.

Don't allow others to run you off the road and cause you to crash and burn because they're trying to add things to the bucket that's already full. The second question then, out of this second question, whose rules do you measure your spiritual health and maturity by?

[32 : 40] Picking up verse 16 through to 23. How do you measure your spiritual health, your maturity? This question is the one that torpedoes so many of us as Christians from time to time.

And I can tell you, it's one that's torpedoing, causing Christians here this morning to crash and burn on a daily basis. whose rules are you measuring your spiritual health and well-being by?

Again, Paul offers only two options. Either spiritual health will be measured by what so-called wise religious people demand, and we'll see the details of that in these verses, or it's measured according to what Christ says, what Jesus says.

And again, the contrast means it's Paul saying, look, it's absolutely crazy to submit yourself to a spiritual audit from those who might sound super spiritual, but who really have no substance at all, who are focused on things that are on the outside, things that in the end can never get to our real problem of our hearts.

So that would be crazy. You polish up the outside, says, Paul, so what? It's useless, puts you through a lot of pain, a lot of trouble, but it does nothing to change your heart, and it's our heart that the Lord looks at.

[34 : 17] So you'd be crazy to go down that pathway. It might sound terrific, it might give you some sense of control, well, these people say, if I do this and this and this, then I'm in control of my own destiny.

Well, it's a shadow, says Paul. There's no substance to that. There's no value in it. Your bucket's already full.

God. Why go to these people, verse 19, when you can go straight to the top, go straight to the head, and get it from his lips, get the real spiritual audit from his lips.

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Who better to know what the body needs than the head? We're back to this organic connection again.

Jesus is actually described there through its joints and ligaments. The body has structure because Jesus is the ligament that connects us to the head, which is the fullness of deity living in Christ.

[35 : 35] It's a picture of complete structural integrity, a complete healthy body. Pleasing God and growing steadily to maturity.

Friends, this is such an important point, such an important point, but you know what? And I say this for myself as well. Obviously, we haven't yet taken it on board, not consistently.

And the reason I know that in my own life is because of the things that distract me, the things I worry about, I'm trying to fill a bucket that's got leaks in it, rather than just looking at that bucket brimming full, the overflowing that's already mine in Christ.

So I'll just finish with a couple of encouragements. In this, these last few verses, there's a play on shadows and substance.

Well, I say to you this morning, don't live in the shadows. Don't live in the shadows when we can live in the substance of Jesus. Don't live as a derelict in a slum, thinking that you have to be religious, thinking that you have to work constantly to reconnect yourself to God, to top up the bucket, to create the good life of completeness.

[37 : 10] When Christ says to you, what are you doing? Even if you did that for the rest of your life, it would never be enough to make yourself acceptable to God. And besides that, why would you do that whenever I want to give you a full bucket as a free gift?

more personally, don't live in the shadows, fearful that your ongoing sin and failure means you're not saved.

There are folk here this morning who are just traumatized by that day and night, maybe more so at night. Don't live in the shadows, fearful that your ongoing sin and failures mean you're not saved.

Don't live in the shadows despairing because you're not sorry enough for your sin. Don't live in the shadows thinking that because your thoughts of God are not pure enough and your trust in God is not strong enough and your knowledge of God is not big enough.

Look at the bucket. filled to the brim. Sufficiency of your Savior and the absoluteness of your Lord who says, you are my beloved child.

[38 : 43] So the problem with doing that is that the bucket that's already full, you think you're going forward but you're actually going backwards because the more you try to add stuff to the full bucket of the gospel, the more you're displacing what Jesus has already done.

And finally, more of a church application, church family application. Church family, don't live in the shadows with a sense of embarrassment or inferiority because our church family doesn't have all the bells and whistles that other groups might have and promote as the evidence of a healthy, mature church.

They might be healthy, mature churches but not because of the bells and whistles they promote. don't live in that shadow, fearful or embarrassed or with a sense of inferiority.

When Jesus tells us from his word clearly that the truly healthy church is the one where Jesus is taught and lived out before one another in love, we saw that from the very first week back in chapter 1 verse 6 and 7 and that's a tough gig to live that out in love and to live it out before a watching world so the watching world thinks, wow, I don't know what makes those Christians tick but I want a part of it.

Don't live in the shadows when the spotlight's on Jesus. Pray with me. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[40 : 35] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, just fill our hearts with this stuff that probably for most of us is so familiar and yet we struggle to hang on to it.

Help us just to keep that picture of things together that you, that we sort of normally want to separate, that you are both a sufficient savior and a gracious, powerful Lord.

that we have a full bucket in Christ that not only are we in Christ but he is in us by his Holy Spirit and that therefore Lord we do truly and completely have life help us to live in the light of it with confidence and abounding in thanksgiving Amen