ROOTED IN CHRIST

Colossians 2:1-23
Key Verses 2:6,7

“So then, 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.”

This past year, we have been studying Paul’s letters to the Romans and now to the Colossians. Through our study of these letters, God has challenged our common sense ideas about what Christianity is. One young man complained about our ministry, saying that I, as a pastor, had a right to counsel students about spiritual matters, but that I didn’t have a right to tell them what to do. This is his common sense idea about Christianity. It is common sense that no one and no book can tell us how to live. But there is a problem. Christianity is not about common sense. As we learned in Colossians chapter 1, Christianity is about the mystery of God, Christ in us. Christianity is a matter of faith that what is impossible for men – salvation from sins and righteousness before God – becomes possible when Christ Jesus lives in us. We thank God that we don’t have to be slaves of our common sense, but we can experience victory over sin and death by faith in Christ Jesus! In today’s passage, St. Paul addresses the conflict that the new believers in Colosse had between the common sense philosophy promoted by some and the gospel faith in Christ they had been taught. May God bless us through today’s passage to know that all wisdom, knowledge and understanding can be found in Christ and in Christ alone!

I. Take root in Christ (1-7)

First, I am struggling for you (1-5). As we have studied, St. Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians while in a Roman prison. Most probably, he spent each day chained at the wrist to a Roman guard while confined in the room where he was staying. Just to live each day was a struggle because of his terrible human conditions. But Paul does not
betray even a touch of unhappiness or complaint because of his own situation. Rather, Paul was full of concern for the churches at Colosse and Laodicea, where there were many whom he had never met in person. They had come to believe the gospel through his good friend, Epaphras. And Paul was delighted with their sincere faith and practical obedience to God's commands to love and to serve. However, Paul was not content. Paul struggled night and day in prayer and in study to help the new believers there continue in their faith (1:9-10, 23).

Look at verses 2 and 3. “My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Paul struggled earnestly in prayer for his Christian brothers and sisters in Colosse and around the world, so that they might have complete understanding, wisdom and knowledge about what they have received through the gospel. Here we are reminded that conversion to Christianity and a confession of faith in the gospel is the first step in a lifelong journey toward the kingdom of light and of the Son. And as human beings, we are always at risk to forget or to be distracted so as to let go and lose that which we had obtained by faith in Jesus Christ. We long to have complete understanding, now. We crave to see the whole picture, yesterday. But the truth is that we must grow in understanding, wisdom and knowledge day by day through a vine and branch relationship with God. Then, what is mysterious and vague becomes clearer and clearer as the things of this world fade away. Then, fine-sounding arguments can no longer deceive us or make us let go of the faith which saved us and which leads us all the way home.

Second, You received Christ Jesus as Lord (6a). Look at verse 6. “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.” In this short verse, Paul describes well the nature of Christian conversion, “...just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord...” 1 Peter 3:15a says, “But in your hearts set apart Christ Jesus as Lord.” Romans 10:9 says, “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you
will be saved.” Christians are those who have received Christ Jesus as Lord. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he exalted him above every power and name and declared him to be King of kings and Lord of lords. This is the objective reality. Christ Jesus is Lord. When we confess our faith in Jesus as the Christ, we receive the Lord of all nature into our hearts as Lord and overseer of our souls. This is God’s mercy to all who believe.

What is the result when we receive Christ as Lord? In short, we become members of one body, whose head is Christ Jesus himself. In the past, we lived to please ourselves. But now, we live to please our Lord Jesus in every way (1:10). In the past, we lived in the dominion of darkness under the power of sin and death. But now, we have been redeemed, and are citizens and servants in the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (1:13-14). In the past, we were alienated from God and were enemies in our minds because of our evil behavior. But now, we have been reconciled to God through Jesus’ blood, and are presented in him as holy, without blemish and free from accusation (1:21-22). In short, once we were slaves to sin and death. But we have been redeemed from slavery to sin, so that we might become slaves of righteousness (Ro 6:13,18-19).

St. Paul’s life of faith illustrates well the Lordship of Christ. Once, he was an ambitious Pharisee, with an overwhelming desire to see the followers of the Way destroyed in order to protect the status quo of the Jewish faith, and to promote his own welfare as a young leader in the Jewish elite. He thought he was defending the faith, but he was in fact defending his own self-righteous way of life. When he authorized the stoning of the martyr Stephen, Paul heard Stephen’s prayer for him, “Lord, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Paul’s “victory” over Stephen and his gospel became hollow indeed. Paul tried his best to justify his violent and blasphemous lifestyle. But when the Risen Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul knew only too well that he had been kicking against the goads. Still, he could not undo what he had done. The Risen Jesus did not condemn Paul, however. He told Paul to wait in Damascus. Then the Risen Jesus sent Ananias to Paul with the message, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings, and
before my people Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:15b-16). Then Paul was baptized into Christ, and something like scales fell from his eyes. From then on, Paul lived as a forgiven sinner and a chosen apostle of Jesus Christ. He had become a servant of the gospel of Jesus Christ, by God’s will. He had received God’s commission to bring the word of God and the mystery of Christ to the world. And Paul did everything within his power to fulfill God’s purpose and calling in his life, out of thanksgiving for what Christ had done in and through him. Paul did not consider his life of service to Christ as unique or special. His earnest prayer was that each and every believer come to know God’s will for him, so that he too might become a servant of God’s desire to have all men come before him redeemed and perfect in Christ. May God bless us to receive Christ Jesus as Lord in our hearts!

Third, Continue to live in Christ (6-7). Look at verses 6 and 7. “So then, 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.” As we have emphasized, there is an objective truth that Christ Jesus is Lord. He is our Judge and the Judge of all the earth, whether we receive him or not. We have no more choice over Christ’s lordship than we do over whether to live on earth. But there is also a personal choice that each person must make whether to receive Christ as Lord in our hearts, and to serve his purpose for our lives. This choice or right is ours by faith. It remains our right to make this choice to the end. Therefore, if we are to receive the hope of salvation and eternal life, we must continue to live in Christ to the end of our lives on earth. Jesus said in John 8:31,32, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Those who want to continue to live in Christ must hold on to Christ’s words of promise and command.

Look again at verse 7. “Rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” When we hold on to Christ’s words of promise, we are depending on Christ for our strength and stability in the face of the storms of life, like a tree whose roots allow it to weather any storm. As long as we live in this
world, we will face the storms of life. Once, Paul was a prisoner on a ship transporting him to Rome. But the captain ignored Paul's advice to stay in port over winter, so that the ship was caught in a northeaster of hurricane force. The ship was driven for two weeks by the storm until the captain, crew and all the passengers despaired. Then Paul said to them, “Keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that [not one of your lives will be lost] just as he told me.” The next day, the ship was run aground on the island of Malta, but not one of the 200 men on board was lost. To live in this world is to face fear, challenge and even evil on a daily basis. But when our root is in Christ, we never have to give in or give up. When our root is in Christ, we can have the victory over this evil world.

Rootedness in Christ is not a one way street. When we put down roots in Christ, he builds us up as one of his children. This is the way of discipleship, first demonstrated in the life of father Abraham. When God called Abram, Abram was a man of few dreams because of his sorrow over not having any children. But God planted in this fatalistic man a dream to be great, and for his name to be great, and for him to be a blessing to all nations on earth. Abram could not believe such a fantastic dream for himself. But he really wanted to have a son. So, he believed and answered God's call. Then, slowly, God began to change this fearful and fatalistic man, Abram into a man of vision and hope, Abraham. Finally, Abraham could recognize himself as a prophet and prayer servant for kings. Most of all, he could recognize himself as a source of blessing for all nations on earth through his son Isaac. This is the mystery of God. For no matter who we may be, when we receive Christ Jesus as Lord and remain in him as branches in a vine, we can be built up into great men and women in Christ. We can be instruments of righteousness, if we continue and are strengthened in the faith as we were taught.

Look once more at verse 7b. “...and overflowing with thankfulness.” The right relationship between children and their parents is one of loving provision and stewardship on the part of the parents, and of thankfulness and rejoicing on the part of the children. It is God’s hope and desire to bless as his children. In order to do so, he even sent his one and only Son to die on the cross, shedding his holy blood to
cleansing our sin-stained blood. This is God’s heart for us. But we must not take God’s heart to save us for granted. Unless we respond with thankfulness and love for what God has done for us and for all men, we will become like men who have no root, and like men who have stopped growing. Thankfulness is the key to happiness. Thankfulness is the spark that keeps our spiritual desire to remain rooted and built up in Christ alive. Jesus counseled his disciples in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” May God bless us to remain in Christ with thanksgiving for his saving grace, and keep us rooted and built up in him!

II. Fullness in Christ (8-15)

First, The philosophy of this world (8). Paul’s earnest counsel to the Colossian Christians was given in view of the prevailing philosophy of the world, which stood in opposition to the gospel and the salvation of sinners. Look at verse 8. “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Paul may have had in mind a specific philosophy or teaching in mind, such as that of early Jewish Gnostics. But what Paul is referring to transcends a specific time or place. In opposition to the gospel of God, which offers sinners salvation by faith in Christ Jesus and in his death and resurrection, there is the way of the world, which tempts men to depend on their own righteousness for the salvation of their souls. It makes no difference what these philosophies cling to. In the end, their foundation is like sinking sand which shifts and crumbles with time. The gospel is in opposition to all these ideas, for the gospel rejects every human righteousness as vain, and declares that the righteousness of Christ alone is trustworthy and true. The promises of Christ form a firm foundation and source of strength for everyone who believes. The promises of the world are hollow and deceptive, because they cannot stand the test of time. Indeed, these promises are given to destroy men, for they lead men to put aside the eternal riches of Christ for the sake of momentary glory followed by eternal shame after judgment.
Second, Circumcision by Christ (9-12). In this part, Paul passionately describes the spiritual gifts that are ours by faith in Christ Jesus. First of all, there is the fullness of God that dwells in us when we belong to Christ. This is a joy that fills our hearts, when we know that God is with us in every trial and circumstance. Secondly, we have been circumcised by Christ. The philosophers of Paul's time emphasized the outward form of circumcision as essential for salvation from sin. These men boasted in their flesh, considering themselves superior to those who did not mark themselves in this way. But they were fools who did not know that God looks at the heart. Those who have received Christ as Lord, both men and women, are circumcised by Christ. Look at verses 11-12. “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” The testimony of men down through the ages is that dependence on human tradition and ritual is in vain. There is no value in physical circumcision, just as there is no value in what we eat or drink or in anything else that is of this world. But despairing men choose to put their trust in outward appearances and shows, rather than in the almighty God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead. Only faith in Christ and in his death and resurrection is not in vain. Together with Christ, we can be set free from the sinful nature, and begin to live as instruments of righteousness and heirs of an eternal kingdom.

Third, Victory in Christ (13-15). Look at verses 13-15. “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of the sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Sometimes, we are tempted to look back at our lives in the world as something to be regretted or savored. But we must remember the truth. We were dead in our sins, and we were slaves of our sinful nature. There is nothing for us in what we were apart from Christ. But what have we gained through our faith in Christ? Firstly, we have gained life. We have gained freedom from
condemnation and man’s judgment. We have been given power to do what is right through the cross, which took the law, the power of sin, and nailed it to the cross. Now, Satan indeed has no hold over us, because we belong to Christ.

III. Shadows and reality (16-23)

Unspiritual men went about trying to tempt the Colossian Christians to live according to worldly rules and regulations. They puffed themselves up as more spiritual than others, because of their many rules, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body. But to Paul, they were chickens with their heads cut off. They were running around and doing many things. But they were still powerless against sin, because they were cut off from the Head, which is Christ. They were chasing shadows. So we must not let them judge us. We must instead put all of our attention and effort into being rooted and built up in Christ, who alone has the power to change our reality from death to life, and from wickedness to righteousness. May God bless you when you firmly decide to live by faith and not by sight in this evil world.

Let’s read the key verses from today’s passage: 2:6,7.