

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 229

Colossians 2:6-8

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Episode Summary

Two of the things we talk about most on the podcast pop up in this episode: the importance of deriving what you believe from the text of Scripture itself and the importance of reading the text in its original context. Regarding the first, we'll explore some of the grammar Paul uses in Col 2:6-7 to talk about God's role and our role in sanctification. In verse 8 we'll discuss the *stoicheia* ("elemental spirits") and how they might fit into the false teaching Paul was confronting at Colossae.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, episode 229: Colossians 2:6-8. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Well, Mike, the conference is this weekend. I hope it's a big success and people will come back next year.

MH: Yeah, I would expect a lot of people would. There's no doubt people learned a lot of stuff. It's nice to meet other scholars. I don't feel any pain or regret in saying, "Hey, it's not just Mike. It's never been about just Mike. It's about good content, and there are a lot of people out there who are producing good content." And when you find, in that pool, people who like to give some of that content to an audience outside their own peers, that's what we're looking for. And to find the people we did... There's more out there, trust me. We will track them down, and I'm quite sure that this year is going to be emblematic of other years. There *are* scholars out there who want you to get good content, and we're going to find them. Lord willing, we will fill up the Naked Bible conference every year with good stuff.

TS: Yeah, I'm super-excited to see other topics, other scholars, and see what we can come up with, but I love it.

Well, shifting gears to Colossians, again, how much stuff there is! We're only going to get to three verses in one episode! [laughter]

MH: Yeah, three verses! [laughs] Well, I knew we'd hit a couple of these in Colossians, and here we are. But we're going to end it with verse 8 today. We're going to do verses 6-8 in Colossians 2. In the next Colossians episode I will start with verse 8 just to do a little bit with context. But I cut it off in verse 8 because I think if I do that, then the next time we *might* get through chapter 2. There are some things later in chapter 2 that are actually going to relate to stuff we're talking about in this episode. If we do it in enough detail here, then I can just sort of blow by it later in the chapter and probably finish chapter 2 in the next episode, but we'll see. There's a logic here to what we're doing, but there's just plenty to talk about in the book. So this episode will be illustrative of how sometimes that's packed into a very small number of verses. So let me read 6-8, and we'll jump in here. Paul writes:

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸ See 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.

Now, after that is when Paul gets into his famous statement, in the very next verse:

⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

We're going to reserve that for the next time, but when we get into verse 8 you're going to see what leads up to that. Why would Paul punctuate the material that he's talking about with this notion of the fullness of deity dwelling in Jesus bodily? To really get the impact of that statement out of isolation and in context, you really need to focus on, frankly, what's going on in verse 8. But we're at the juncture here where we can combine a few of these things. Any one of these things that we'll talk about today could get a whole episode, but we'll do our best to condense these three verses into one. But we'll get to that—to the big verse for a lot of people in Colossians, which is verse 9. So, backing up to verse 6, Paul says something that you'd think would be really simple. In some ways, it *is* very simple, but there's a lot to think about in verses 6 and 7. So in verse 6, he says, "Therefore," hearkening back to the material that he's been talking about up to this point—the conclusion that he reaches because of that material.

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,

5:00 And then he adds some ancillary thoughts:

⁷ rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

So you might think, “Okay, ‘as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in him,’ so like, be holy, be godly. We can move on now. There’s not a whole lot to think about here.” Well, there actually is. There’s some real theology packed in here, and a lot of the things to think about are derived from the grammar. So we’re going to be talking a good bit about some points of Greek grammar today, specifically in relationship to verses 6 and 7, and then we’ll move on to verse 8.

But it starts right off the bat: “as you received Christ Jesus the Lord.” *As*—it’s the Greek word *hōs*; it’s just a conjunction. It can mean “just as,” in terms of likeness, sort of a comparative point. It could also mean “on the grounds of.” So the interpretive question to ask is, what relationship is indicated by the Greek word *hos* (“as”)? If it indicates a comparison, the point would be “as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him.” The way that you live needs to be in harmony with the message you received. Your conduct needs to be appropriate (commensurate, consistent with) the fact that you’ve received Christ as Lord.

I’m going to build a little bit on a particular book. If you’re into Greek, it’s useful. The Summer Institute of Linguistics has a series of handbooks—*Exegetical Summaries*, they call them. This one’s by Martha King: *An Exegetical Summary of Colossians*. And basically, it just goes through the work—through the book—grammatically, and asks interpretive questions. And the authors, the editors, will tell you how different translations render a particular Greek word. And by virtue of the interpretive questions that the editor in any particular volume will ask, you’ll be able to see a little bit more of the logic behind a particular translation’s rendering. And they’ll also interact with commentaries— how different commentators take things. So King (I’m using her work here, kind of as a starting point)... When it comes to comparison, it’s an issue of consistency. “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.” That requires a little bit of thought, too. We’ll get to that in a moment. What does that actually mean? Because, okay, I get the fact that I’ve chosen to believe in Jesus, and so now I should live like I made that choice—like I was serious about it, that sort of thing. And there should be a comparative consistency there. We can understand that pretty well, but there’s a little bit more to it than that.

But the second way that you could take the conjunction (this idea of “on the basis of” or “on the grounds that”)... So if you were traveling along that trajectory as a translator or as an interpreter, pastor, student, whatever, you would be thinking something like, “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, live in him.” In other words, the Colossians have accepted the teaching which proclaims Christ as Lord, so they need to be obedient to him. And that sort of sounds like the first one, except here’s the little twist to it. You need to be thinking in such a way that

what... Paul could turn to the Colossians and say, “Now, the things that I’m going to ask you to do or not do, these are discipleship things. The ways I’m going to ask you to behave or not behave... the grounds for me doing that is the fact that you’ve identified yourself with Jesus. And I’m not going to teach you anything that Jesus didn’t model first. The things that Jesus taught his disciples, he modeled for them by himself. He was completely consistent in this. So Paul could be angling for not just consistency in your behavior because you claim to be a follower of Jesus, but he could be angling for the notion that, “some of the things that I’m going to tell you to do or not do are going to sound tough, but the basis for all that—the grounds for how I’m going to instruct you to walk as a Christian, to live—that’s grounded in this decision that you’ve said you’ve made.” So one is a little bit internal; the other one’s a little bit external. Things to think about.

10:00

I think what you’re going to get in this episode is a little bit of me illustrating or modeling how scholars think about the text, because when you’re reading your English Bible and you’re able... If you’ve had a little bit of Greek, a little bit of Hebrew, you can penetrate the English translation a little bit. It’s one thing to spot, to be able to detect that “the Greek word behind this English word is XYZ.” It’s quite another thing to take that information (especially if it concerns grammar and not just word meaning—not just semantics, but if it concerns grammatical forms)... It’s quite another thing to be able to ask, “What are the implications of this particular verb tense, of this particular conjunction? What are the implications?” So I’m hoping that you get to see a little bit in this episode how scholars tend to think about the data. I’ve often said the real key to good Bible study—serious Bible study—is knowing the right questions to ask. And so a tool like this one... This particular work is *An Exegetical Summary of Colossians* put out by the SIL International (Summer Institute of Linguistics). It’s a 2008 work. They have a whole series of these. So if you know a little bit of the language, this is a great tool for helping you ask the right questions. It’s really important in Bible study.

So let’s go back to... We’re just at the first word in here (actually the second word, but the first word that we’re considering), this conjunction: “as” (*hos* in Greek). So it could be either relative comparison or something about the grounds on which you ought to behave that are deriving from your profession of faith. Let’s just put that into real world terms—interpretive questions. How does one receive Christ? If the basis is “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,” how do we do that? How do you receive Christ? Well, the answer is “by faith.” So that ought to suggest that faith has something to do with your walk, that it’s not only a matter of checking off boxes in a checklist. There’s something here about the Christian walk, about sanctification, that is linked to the issue of faith—believing loyalty.

Because of *Unseen Realm* and other episodes of the podcast we’ve done, I use this phrase “believing loyalty” to talk about salvation. “Believing” is the faith part; “loyalty” is how we live in light of our faith. So believing loyalty combines these

two things. And what Paul is getting at here is that your faith decision and faith itself has something to do, as well, with how you look at sanctification. It's not only behavioral. You can't divorce the belief that you have from the process. So let's just store that away. In other words, another way to look at this is Paul isn't going to say, "Great, you believe. Now it's time to store up merit. Now it's time to add works to your faith so that you'll be saved." He's not saying that. He's not only linking faith with your walk—with sanctification—but he's saying that the latter in some way is based upon or can be compared to or is grounded in the former—in faith. It's still largely about faith. It's not that faith is something that is like this dot event in your life and now you get to heaven by virtue of the things you do, accruing merit, stored up good works, as though you need to supplement faith.

I've talked about this many times on the podcast. In the series on Hebrews, we devoted a whole episode to the topic of "are good works essential to salvation?" or whatever we called it. But here we are again. And even the grammar helps you mentally, helps you intellectually, to both distinguish these things and also blend them together. It's not that one happens and the other one takes over. That's not what Paul's saying. They have a relationship to each other where one is primary (the faith); the other is derivative (from that faith).

15:00

So just in this one little particle, just asking good interpretive questions helps you to think these thoughts—and not only think the thoughts, but it helps you to see that such thoughts are justified on the basis of the text. What we try to drill into people's heads here at the Naked Bible podcast is that we don't care about creeds and confessions. It's not that they're bad or sinister or evil. They have a good purpose. What we care about most is what can the text sustain interpretively? And specifically, we approach that question by taking the text in its own context. Not a foreign context, like church history or something like that—some movement or person. We want to read the text in light of its own original context. And then we're concerned with, now that we've done that (we've considered the text in its own context), what can it sustain interpretively, and then how do we apply that? So what you're going to see in this episode is how scholars try to do that. And a lot of that is just about asking good questions.

So we've got a relationship between *receiving Christ by faith* and *walking in him*. Now the word "received" (we're going to get into some grammar here)... "As you *received* Christ Jesus the Lord"... The word "received" in the Greek language is an aorist tense; specifically it's aorist active indicative. Now indicative is the mood of reality as opposed to the mood of unreality. Other moods deal with unreality. And the difference grammatically is that the indicative mood is really concerned with things as they are. There's no guess work to it; there's no contingency. It's either something that has happened already (the action is complete, and it's real) as opposed to, "Well, it *might* happen." That's future or some other contingency—an imperative. "Will they obey or not? I don't know; I'm just giving the command." There's a certain uncertainty, an unreal aspect to it. The

subjunctive puts conditions into the picture. We don't know if the action is going to happen if the writer uses the subjunctive mood, because there are contingencies going on.

Indicative mood ignores all that. Indicative mood is about something that's real; it's really happened. So we have an aorist. The aorist tense in Greek focuses on action as a snapshot. In other words, the action, whatever it is and whenever it happened, is usually in the past because it's an action that's completed. That's typically how it's looked at. Whatever the action is, it's complete. It's not in process, it's not contingent on anything, it's not out in the future. The action is completed. It's something that has happened. So the aorist helps communicate to the readers (and, of course, in the day of the New Testament, listeners—people listening to the language) the idea of something being described whose action as a whole is completed (not in process, not contingent, not anything like that).

So when we look at this verse, the reception of Christ... This is something Paul is reminding his readers of. "You guys did this. You received Christ the Lord. So walk in him. In fact, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, *walk* in him." And then he adds a series of participles. Here's where we get into the, "I wonder how to read this." He follows "received Christ Jesus the Lord" and then he says "now walk in him," and then he says, "rooted," "built up..." Going back to the text:

⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

So we've got *rooted*, *built up*, *established*, and *abounding*. They're all participles. That means the activity described by those words is in some way tied or related to the main verb, which is "received," which is the aorist—the snapshot action. The meaning of these participles is in some way tied to the event of that earlier verb.

Now "rooted" is a passive participle in the Greek language. "Built up"... Paul uses another passive. "Established" is passive. And then he switches when he gets to "abounding" to something active. Why does he do that? "Rooted" is a perfect tense. "Built up" is present. "Established" is present. "Abounding" is present. Why does he use a perfect for one of them and the present for the others? We're going to get into what these different tenses mean. But if we believe that the writer (in this case, Paul) was doing something intentional... He has something that's in his head that he wants to communicate, and Greek allows him to be pretty precise in the language he uses. And our task is trying to discern, what is the relationship of all these actions to each other? Why are most of them passive, and then you have one that's active? What's going on here?

20:00

So I'm going to go through a series of interpretive questions that... In this resource I mentioned (King's book—her *Exegetical Summaries*), she raises a number of questions. It's a reference kind of tool. And I've picked a few out because for the purpose of the podcast episode I think they're going to be really instructive and useful. But she asks at one place, "What is the significance of the perfect tense of the first participle here? What is the significance of the perfect tense of the first of these three participles, and then the present tense of the rest of them? Why does Paul do this?"

So the first one here... If we were going to read it really literally as far as making sure we recognize that it's a perfect and it's a passive, this is how we would read the verse. So "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, having been *rooted*..." That's a perfect passive rendering. Perfect tense in Greek conveys an action or event that has occurred in the past, but it has continuing effects or results. Here, it signifies a *previous rooting*. At some point, we got rooted. And then, also, the *present state*. You're still rooted; it's continuing on. The point here that Paul is trying to communicate is that the Colossians were rooted in Christ when they received him, and they are presently rooted in him. The effect continues from the point they received Christ. Their rooting in Christ took place. Think of a plant metaphor: they got planted in Christ, but now they have to grow to maturity.

So the rooting here is not something that the Colossians did to themselves; it's something that was done *to* them. It's passive. And it happened when they received Christ. That's the aorist, that's this one-time event, this completed event. And then in relation to that event, they *were* rooted. Something or someone rooted them in Christ. Of course, this is going to be God. They didn't do this themselves, but they were put in Christ. They were rooted in Christ. Again, Paul is using a plant metaphor here. You put a plant in the ground; it takes hold. Now you expect it to progress to maturity, to grow. He follows that with three present tense participles. Now, the present tense, just like it sounds, is used in Greek, not to convey like the aorists... It's not like the aorists. It's not to convey action that is a completed whole. Rather, you would use the present tense to convey the sense of action in progress. And that might be like linear progress or it could be intermittent progress. There's different kinds of progresses—different ways that you or something makes progress, either metaphorically or literally. We don't want to drill down too much into Greek syntax here, but it's action in process. It's not yet completed. Aorist is completed. "You received Christ" (that we took care of).

By the way, this argues quite forcefully against the idea that you have to keep receiving Christ. That's not the way scripture talks about a faith event—a faith encounter—with the gospel. It's not "you've got to keep having the encounter." No, no, no. Now, there are things linked to the faith decision. That's what Paul's getting at here. When you make that decision, God roots you—he plants you—in Christ, and then Paul follows that with three present participles: "built up" (and it's

passive, so now that you've been planted, you're being built up)... There's a progression there in the way I worded that. It's not "having been built up." It's not something completed with ongoing results. It's actually something that follows being rooted. Now you're being built up—you're being established—and then here we switch to the active. You should be "abounding" in this new life. So let's talk about the three presents here. Obviously, we have a progression here. King asks at this point:

25:00

What relationship is indicated by the use of the participles ἐρριζωμένοι 'having been rooted' and ἐποικοδομούμενοι 'being built up' and also the following participles βεβαιούμενοι 'being established' and περισσεύοντες 'overflowing' [ESV: "abounding"]?

How should we get the full picture here? She has a number of options here. The way scholars have thought about, "How would we articulate the relationship of the first aorist verb and then all these participles that follow?" You have the three passives and then one active. Like, "What's Paul trying to convey here?" So she has a number of options in her book that she's drawing from different places. I'm going to focus on two of them. I'll be honest with you here. One that I'm going to exclude that you'll actually find in commentaries is, there are commentators out there who take the passive participles as being imperatives, like commands. To me, that's not coherent, because I don't know how you obey a passive command. How do you do that? Because as soon as you start doing it, you turn it into active. It just doesn't make any sense. But anyway, let's just set that aside and get that off my chest.

What King has here, and I think the two that are really worth thinking about... She says there's two ways to understand the relationship here. One is what she calls "amplification." That is, all four participles describe a part of what living in Christ involves. So you're in Christ now, you received him, and Paul has said now you need to walk in him, and then he starts talking about being rooted, or having been rooted, being built up, being established, all that sort of stuff. So one way to look at this is that the participles describe different aspects of what living in Christ involves. They describe the characteristics (maybe that's a better way to say it) of one who is walking consistently with their profession. The other option is that they indicate *means*. So one is *amplification*, in her language; the other one is *means*. What she means by this is that we are to live in Christ *by means of* having been rooted. They can live in Christ only as all four means are used or practiced.

N.T. Wright actually shifts into this in his commentary which I've quoted before in Colossians episodes (his little Tyndale commentary). I think it depends how you look at that, because that can veer off into taking passives as commands, which I'm insisting (I think with good reason) that that just doesn't make a whole lot of sense. But I'll pull back a little bit and say this: both of these options

(amplification or characteristics and means) have something to contribute, I think. Both options are predicated on or they describe or they elaborate upon this snapshot action of the aorist, that you received Christ. The aorist points to an action that is complete. The perfect participle presumes completed rooting (having been rooted), but then it turns to progression (there's still an ongoing thing going on here.) As I said earlier, the Colossians were rooted in Christ when they received him and they are presently rooted in him. The effect continues from the point that they received Christ. Their rooting in Christ took place (again, the plant metaphor) and now they have to grow to maturity.

Now, if we apply the options King lists, the ensuing present participles describe the characteristics of one who lives in Christ and the means to progress in that rooting—either one of those. The rooting began when they received Christ. The progression should be normal. Fruit should be seen. It's easy to see a role for the Colossians if we look at this as being fruitful. So it's not that the Colossians are accomplishing these things, because in one sense (especially the passive ones: being built up, being established), God has to do that work and he's already done that work. Because the grammar links it to the rooting, and of course back to the receiving Christ.

30:00 But on the other hand, the Colossians shouldn't resist. We get into this idea, and this is in Ephesians (remember, Ephesians and Colossians are twin epistles)... Paul talks in Ephesians about not quenching the Spirit, not resisting the Spirit. So it could be (and I think it is) that you could still talk about these things as being not only *characteristics* of someone who's walking with the Lord, but also the *means* if we qualify that by saying that as you are obedient, as you try to obey Jesus the way he would live, yes, it is God who is perfecting you. God is establishing you. God is doing these things to you, especially these passive terms. But you have a role here in that you're not resisting. You're not living in sin. You're keeping close accounts with God (if we want to put it that way). We're trying to do the right thing, because we love the Lord. Not that we're storing up merit... We can't look at it that way, because Paul has already linked sanctification in this verse. In verse 6, he's already linked sanctification with faith. It's not about storing up works. It's about cooperating, not resisting the activity of the Spirit—the prompting of the Spirit—in your life.

So we can talk a little bit about a role to play, so I'm not going to be too hard on Wright the way he takes this. I think it has some legitimacy. But we don't want to turn passive participles into commands, because that's just not terribly coherent. We can't forget God's role, and God's role is primary.

Now, King goes on to ask... She senses this whole issue of “is it God doing it or is it you (the Colossians)?” She actually asks in her handbook:

Who is the implied actor of the two passive participles in this clause?

In other words, these aren't commands; these are passive. So it's either the Colossians who are doing these things (and that doesn't make a whole lot of sense if they're not commands) or it's God who has rooted them, God who is building them up progressively, God who is establishing them in the faith progressively. But they still have a role to play because we can resist the Spirit. We can choose, as Paul says in Romans, to surrender our members to sin—all that kind of talk. The thing is, if we don't do that and if we do try to imitate Jesus, we're not storing up merit here. If we try to live out of a heart of gratitude the way Jesus wants us to live, if we try to image him so that we can become better imagers of God—the kind of imagers of God that God intended from the beginning in terms of quality, not just status—if we're really cooperating in that enterprise, it's God who will build us up and will establish us. And we should be thankful.

In my view, exegetically, that's why Paul follows it with not a passive but an active participle. We should be abounding in thanksgiving. We should be grateful. We're back to this gratitude theme. We talked in earlier episodes of the podcast that works do not supplement salvation, as though salvation by faith needed help. Rather, we do works—we live a holy life—for other reasons or purposes. We don't live a holy life to convince God to like us. We do it for other reasons. We had a whole episode on this. Well, one of those reasons was gratitude. And Paul comes right back to that theme here in Colossians 2:6-7.

What I'm hoping you're seeing here is that there is an exegetical basis for the kind of thinking that I've tried to convey (in not only this episode, but prior episodes) about the relationship of salvation by faith and sanctification (holy living). There's an exegetical basis to it. It's not just something I'd like to hear or I'd like to say. It derives from the text. We can't lose sight of God's role in this, but we don't want to either usurp God's role or diminish our own to the point where we have no role at all. But when we talk about *role*, it's responding to God—in this passage, with abundant thankfulness—realizing that if we live like he wants us to, he will do things internally to us. He will change us. He will (borrowing language from Romans now) make sure that we are conformed to the image of his Son and not the image of the world.

So God has a definite role here. We more or less need to stay out of his way, [laughs] and approach it that way. It's not about earning enough brownie points so that God decides he still loves us. I've said it many times. I just want you to know and hopefully see a little bit (and this is a very cursory look at it) that that kind of thinking derives from the text. It's about the text. It's not what you want to hear, it's about the text.

Let me just come down to where we were at in our previous episode in Colossians. We'll link this one to that one. You received Christ. You're rooted to him as a result. Therefore, God will continue to build you up and establish you.

The only potential problem with this (going back to our previous episode, Colossians 1:23)... All these things are going to be true. Because you received Christ, you were rooted by an external force (i.e., God—it's passive). Having been rooted in Christ, you will therefore be built up (it's passive), you will be established (it's passive—again, God is the primary actor in both of those things), and in your response you're abounding (active) in thankfulness; all of that's going to happen (and now I'm going to quote Colossians 1:23)...

²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting [“being moved”—that's passive, as well] from the hope of the gospel that you heard...

It still goes back to “You must believe.” It's believing loyalty. You must believe. And if you believe—if you cooperate with God, if you believe, and if you're trying to imitate the Lord and you're trying to do what your savior and your master says, God will do these things in you. He will produce fruit from your life. He will build you up and establish you. These things will happen. Your life *will* change. God will work in it. But you have to keep believing. That's really your primary role. Why else would you obey what God tells you to do or to avoid? Why else would you repent of this or that sin and do this or that thing, or abstain from this or that thing? Why else would you do it?

If you *believe* that the gospel really is what it says it is, if it really does result in eternal life (you really are forgiven), if you really believe these things, and then the same God who offered you that salvation says, “I want you to be like me. I want your character to be in alignment with my character. I want you to imitate my Son in the way he lived here”... Do you believe the same God is telling you to do those things? And when he says, “If you do this, it's going to improve you from the inside out. You're going to become a better person,” if we can use that vernacular. You're going to become conformed to the image of his Son. “You're going to be vessels that I can use to further the kingdom.” All these things that we've talked about in relationship with sanctification. The only way you do that is if you realize you can't earn God's love, because he loved you before you even had the first thought of any of this stuff. He loved you while you were yet a sinner, while you were an enemy.

If you realize that, then your motivation for living a certain way can't be to earn heaven. So then, what is it? It's to be loyal to this God who saved you, who has forgiven you, who loves you. It's returning love. It's also being useful to him, because you want other people to be part of this. You want other people to have everlasting life. There's lots of reasons to live a certain way. One of them is not keeping God happy with you or convincing him to love you. And that's where people get *trapped*. That's where you'll meet a lot of Christians who are *trapped*. They become uncertain about God's disposition to them because they turned it into a works thing. It's sinister; it's bad theology, and it's sinister in the sense that it will produce misery. It will produce internal conflict—all the time.

40:00

So hopefully we're seeing that, on the basis of the text, we need to think about the relationship of these concepts (these things) in a certain way—that Paul is angling to get you, the reader, to think in certain ways about these things. If we move to verse 8 and all of that stuff about, “Hey, you received Christ, now you need to walk in him, having been planted—having been rooted... God did that when you received Christ. You're in Christ now.” Using a planting metaphor, now the normal expectation is that you will progressively grow. But God's in that, too. God will establish you. God will build you up. Your job is to abound in thankfulness. That's your motivation for essentially staying out of God's way, not resisting the Spirit, not surrendering yourself to sin, all this kind of stuff. So God's going to produce wonderful things in you. Back to Colossians 1:23:

²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting [not being shifted or moved, it's passive] from the hope of the gospel that you heard.

All of that makes sense in light of what he says next in Colossians 2:8. You're going to see Paul's really still concerned about “you Colossians continuing in the faith.” He says in verse 8:

⁸ See 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.

So it's obvious that Paul has a concern about the Colossians. Will they continue in the faith? If they do, God will produce a wonderful work in them. But will they do that? Will they be moved by something? Will they be moved away from the hope of the gospel to something else? And it comes out here in verse 8:

⁸ See 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.

Don't believe something else. Don't be shifted. Now, basically he's saying, “Don't be deceived. Don't be moved away from the hope of the gospel. Don't listen to philosophy and empty deceit that accords with human tradition that is somehow put forth or stimulated by or put out there, instigated, by elemental spirits. If you move away, you risk not being built up and established in the faith,” to say it in reverse. You have to continue in the faith. In other words, philosophy and empty deceit that Paul warns about can lead to unbelief. Paul's saying, “You've got to look out for that. Don't be moved.”

Put still another way, Colossians needed to continue in faith to grow. Just as they received Christ in faith, they needed to walk in faith. They needed to believe that God would do these things in their lives if they just got out of the way—if they didn't sin, if they didn't go off and do these other things, if they didn't stop believing. They needed to have the same faith. Paul is linking sanctification and salvation by virtue of the concept of faith. If Paul was standing there in front of the Colossians, I can imagine him saying, "Look, live now in faith. Keep believing and live accordingly. God *will* establish you. He *will* build you up. He *will* sanctify you. He *will* produce in you what he wants to produce. He *will* use you as he wants to, if you believe and keep believing."

Now, what's behind Paul's concern? What's the deal with philosophy and empty deceit? What's the relationship of those things? And throw in the elemental spirits of the world. What's he talking about here? Well, the Greek term here is the one we get our word philosophy from, it's *philosophia*. It refers to human wisdom, just generally, and not any particular Greek philosopher or something like that. It's just human wisdom, generally. And here (because he's writing to the Colossians) it certainly has something to do with the false teaching of his opponents in Colossae. We've talked about the Colossian Heresy and how that can have pagan elements and Gentile elements. It can also derive from mystical Judaism. We're actually getting into the material now where scholars have looked at what Paul says and have really seen through the whole of Colossians that it has something to do with the worship of angels or the elevation of angels to certain status, or something like that. And so Paul crosses into that territory here with the word *stoicheia*, the elemental spirits. Now, if you've read *Unseen Realm*, you're going to know what my take is on this. I might as well just... I'll quote a little bit from *Unseen Realm*.

I wrote that *stoicheia* (that lemma) can refer to one of four things:

1. It can refer to basic principles of religious teaching (like in a Jewish context, the law).
2. It can refer to the rudimentary substances of the physical world (earth, wind, fire, water).
3. It can refer to celestial deities (divine beings up in the heavens somewhere)
4. It can be spiritual beings, more generically.

45:00 So the term is used in Greek literature for any of those four things. The last two (celestial deities or astral deities versus spiritual beings in general)... There's a bit of a distinction there, but one's a subset of the other. Now, I have a footnote in *Unseen Realm*... If you're looking for a good source for this, if you have the *InterVarsity Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, I recommend the articles by Dan Reid. He wrote the one on elemental spirits. I think he wrote the one on rulers and authorities and dominions and thrones and stuff like that, as well. Dan is not one to shy away from the supernatural implications of this, so I recommend his

articles there. In the book, the way he breaks some of these things down... I give him a nod for that. Back to what I wrote in the *Unseen Realm*:

Paul's use of the term in Gal 4 and later in this chapter (Col 2:20-23) seems to transcend Jewish laws ...

In other words, he's not just talking about Jewish legalism (though I'd say that's partly in play in Galatians 4, at least in part of the passage). But I'd say here in Colossians, what's he's thinking about transcends that. It transcends mere human tradition.

In Col 2:15 he clearly uses the language of hostile evil spirits (rulers and authorities); cp. Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12, recalling that Ephesians and Colossians are "twin epistles," sharing thematically-related content)...

Ephesians 1:21 is a pretty clear reference to rulers and dominions in heavenly places—the spirit world. Of course, you have Ephesians 6:12—the principalities and powers. Ephesians 3:10 is another reference. Paul uses “rulers and authorities” terms of spiritual beings very clearly, and he uses those same terms here in Colossians 2:15, which we'll get to next time in another episode in Colossians. He uses it there, but it's in the same paragraph as his reference to elemental spirits here in Colossians 2:8. So my take is that we can't restrict the language here to just Jewish legalism. There's something else going on here, because Paul is going to talk about being forgiven for our trespasses and how all of that disarms the rulers and authorities, and all that kind of stuff. There's some cosmic significance here—some cosmic flavoring to it—that we can't ignore.

I don't want to get into my whole treatment of *stoicheia* in *Unseen Realm*, but hopefully this gives you an idea. Since Paul, in the letter to the Colossians (and other letters), is speaking to both Jews and Gentiles, he might be using a particular term that a Gentile hearer would think one thing and Jewish hearer would think another. But even if that's the case, because of Jewish mysticism and of course because of pagan religion, supernatural beings are on the table when Paul uses this terminology, and I would say certainly in the way he uses it. There's something going on here about that. Whatever he's concerned that the Colossians are swallowing, whatever he's concerned might move them away from the gospel, it involves supernatural evil spirits. And so that's just part of the picture.

Now if you're a student of scripture (some people use the podcast episodes and then they drill down in different resources.), you're going to come across articles and whatnot that will sort of try to isolate the *stoicheia* to something that's not supernatural. It's very common, even with evangelicals, who are supposed to be predisposed to the supernatural belief system. As I said at the beginning of *Unseen Realm*, in many cases even evangelicals—even people who claim to

have a supernatural worldview and a high view of scripture—will do all they can to *not* see the supernatural in certain places. And this is one of those. They try to wipe it off the table. My caution to you (because of the reasons I just talked about and lots of backgrounding in *Unseen Realm*) is: don't do that. Don't do that. You're going to be missing the point. Let me just give you one example of this. There are some commentators in Colossians will say, "Well, what Paul's talking about here with the *stoicheia* is really just... It's not Jewish legalism. That's kind of obvious. There's more here than that. What he's talking about are the elements of the world: earth, wind, fire, and water. That's all he means: 'Don't fall victim to some sort of weird nature worship,' or something like that."

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Paul is not confronting pantheism or nature worship. It goes well beyond that. It's an unnecessary conclusion to draw, and I would say (and here's the point I want listeners to catch) going that direction amounts to ignoring or being ignorant of or denying the Jewish context to even the basic elements (earth, wind, fire and water). Believe it or not, in mystical Judaism and certain Second Temple texts (pseudepigraphical texts), you can find passages that let us know that some Jews presumed the elements were in some way associated with supernatural beings. So it doesn't do you any good to retreat to the elements of the world, as if Paul's going after nature worship here. It doesn't do you any good because in both Gentile circles and Jewish circles, the elements of the world were thought to be somehow controlled or empowered or under the supervision of supernatural beings. You can't get away from the supernatural. (I guess you can—you just ignore it.) But if you're trying to honor context, you can't just wipe the supernatural flavor of a word like *stoicheia* off the table. Some passages are more clear than others, but there are going to be occasions where people want to do that, because, "We can't go there, because that's too weird." And then you get into conversations like, "Well, what's so normal about the virgin birth?" That's a conversation that they don't want to have.

So let me give you a few examples of how even in a Second Temple Jewish context you get this notion of supernatural beings that have some association with the fundamental elements of the world as they were understood at the time. Jubilees 2:2. This is what it says:

²For on the first day he [God] created the heavens, which are above, and the earth, and the waters and all of the spirits which minister before him:

the angels of the presence,
and the angels of sanctification,
and the angels of the spirit of fire,
and the angels of the spirit of the winds,
and the angels of the spirit of the clouds and darkness and snow and hail
and frost,
and the angels of resoundings and thunder and lightning,

and the angels of the spirits of cold and heat and winter and springtime
and harvest and summer,
and all of the spirits of his creatures which are in heaven and on earth.

And (he created) the abysses and darkness—both evening and night—and light—
both dawn and daylight—which he prepared in the knowledge of his heart.

That's Jubilees 2:2. Here's a passage from Enoch. 1 Enoch 60:11-12. That passage reads as follows, with Enoch talking:

¹¹Then the other angel who was going with me was showing me the hidden things: what is first and last in heaven, above it, beneath the earth, in the depth, in the extreme ends of heaven, the extent of heaven; ¹²the storerooms of the winds, how the winds are divided, how they are weighed, how the winds divide and dissipate, the openings of the winds, each according to the strength of its wind; the power of the light of the moon and how it is the right amount, the divisions of the stars, each according to its nomenclature, and all the subdivisions...

It's interesting because it suggests that those things are controlled by some intelligence. But I would suggest combining that little passage (1 Enoch 60:11-12) with this one: 1 Enoch 43:1-4.

And I saw other lightnings and the stars of heaven. And I saw how he called them each by their (respective) names, and they obeyed him. ²And I saw the impartial scales for the purpose of balancing their lights at their widest areas. And their natures are as follows: Their revolutions produce lightning; and in number they are (as many as) the angels; they keep their faith each one according to their names. ³And I asked the angel who was going with me and who had shown me the secret things, "What are these things?" ⁴And he said to me, "The Lord of the Spirits has shown you the prototype of each one of them: These are the names of the holy ones who dwell upon the earth and believe in the name of the Lord of the Spirits forever and ever."

1 Enoch 80:6-8 says:

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⁶Many of the chiefs of the stars shall make errors in respect to the orders given to them; they shall change their courses and functions and not appear during the seasons which have been prescribed for them. ⁷All the orders of the stars shall harden [in disposition] against the sinners and the conscience of those that dwell upon the earth. They [the stars] shall err against them [the sinners]; and modify all their courses. Then they [the sinners] shall err and take them [the stars] to be

gods. ⁸ And evil things shall be multiplied upon them; and plagues shall come upon them, so as to destroy all.

Now, what's interesting about that passage is it seems to affirm and deny [laughs] in the same breath the notion that these natural forces are divine beings. I say "seems" because I think the best way to read this is that the writer is warning readers (whom he refers to as "sinners") of taking these forces and the supernatural beings that are in charge of them as gods, as deities, as things to be worshipped. The writer of 1 Enoch would be very much opposed to the worship of anything (invisible or visible, in heaven or on earth) other than the true God. So I think his concern is treating them as gods, i.e., bowing down and worshipping them. And of course, that's a biblical injunction, as well. "You shall not bow down to the host of heaven." So on and so forth. You get these passages that... There are different ways you can take them and read them. But I think a common denominator idea is that ancient people (these are Jewish writers here), whether Jewish or pagan, had some notion (and it varied) that what was going on in the heavens (in the natural world) was either related to or empowered by, or supervised by, or whatever, the invisible world. And here we have, in this last passage in Enoch, an injunction to not worship them. So I think that's what Paul is concerned about.

If we take that back to Colossians, we actually could read Paul's statement about not being deceived—not being moved away from the gospel—by philosophy and empty thinking, empty deceit—this human wisdom. Of what kind? Because he uses the reference to *stoicheia* there: "Don't be fooled into thinking that your Lord is anything other than Jesus." There it is in one sentence. Don't be deceived into thinking your Lord is anyone or anything other than Jesus. Jesus is the one who gives you salvation. Jesus is the one that you should be living like. He's the one that should be the focus of your attention and your worship. Do not be moved, because we're going to hit other things besides *stoicheia*. They believe... It's a spectrum of belief as far as how much divinity to assign here, and what the role of divinity is with the natural world. There's more than one view of this in ancient Judaism and even in paganism, for that matter. But they didn't divorce the supernatural from the question in their context. They thought there was some relationship there.

But regardless of what the relationship is, Paul is saying, "Look, it's bad theology to elevate any of that—any of it—to the level of Jesus. This is why he's going to follow verse 8 with verse 9: "For in Jesus, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." Especially if he's talking to... If he's trying to give a poke in the eye to Jewish opponents at Colossae who are into this Jewish mysticism stuff (this goes back to our discussion of the Colossian Heresy), especially to them, he's saying, "Look, the God that you guys say is in command ultimately of *all* of this, and *all* of these other beings—*that* God dwells bodily in Jesus." When he was on earth, it's the incarnation: "dwelt bodily." But even now... We're going to talk about the

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language of Colossians 2:9 next time. But it's a reference to the incarnation. After the resurrection, it's going to be an emphasis on the sameness of essence—sameness of being—between Jesus and God. They're the same. You can't claim to be honoring God—the Most High—and putting Jesus underneath these things, or even underneath God, because he *is* God. So he's hitting this heresy in very specific ways that his audience... They're going to catch the drift. They're going to catch the language. So we need to put ourselves into their worldview to understand the trajectory of Paul's messaging—really, what he's trying to hit at and what he really needs to address here. I'm going to wrap up the episode with two quotations here that I think are pretty good. Dunn, in his commentary (*New International Greek Testament Commentary*) on Colossians says this. He quotes 1 Enoch 75:1. He brings that into the discussion, so I'll start with that. This is in Dunn as he quotes 1 Enoch 75:1:

1 Enoch 75:1: “the leaders of the chiefs of thousands who are in charge of all the stars”; *2 Enoch* 4:1: “the rulers of the stellar orders ..., the angels who govern the stars”; *Testament of Abraham* 13:11: “the archangel Purouel, who has authority over fire” (Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 98, cites *1 Enoch* 43:1–2 and *2 Enoch* 19:1–4). *1 Enoch* 18:14–16 also speaks of stars bound and imprisoned for their transgression [MH: Of course, that's a reference to the Watchers], and the Greek fragment of *Jubilees* 2:8 links “the placings of the stars” with τὰ στοιχεῖα (καὶ τὰς τῶν ἄστρον θέσεις καὶ τὰ στοιχεῖα). We might also note that some fragmentary horoscopes have been discovered among the DSS (4Q186 and 4QMessAr), that one of the ways in which Hellenistic Jewish apologists sought to commend Judaism was by presenting the Jewish patriarchs as the discoverers of astrology (Artapanus and pseudo-Eupolemus in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.18.1 and 9.17.8–9), and that Josephus could describe the Pharisees and the Essenes in particular as believers in Fate (*Antiquities* 13.172) and could even claim that the Essenes prayed to the sun (*War* 2.128).

That's from Josephus's *Wars of the Jews* 2.128. I actually think Dunn overstates that passage a little bit.

But anyway, Dunn has assembled these passages from Second Temple texts. And I'll go back to what he says, that when Josephus and these other writers are commending Judaism, they're saying these things and referencing these passages and these ideas because they want Judaism to be on a par with secular Hellenistic Greek thought. You'll actually read texts that have Abraham as a master astrologer, for instance—that kind of thing. They weren't afraid of this kind of thinking, is the point. But of course, Paul's warning is that, “Look, you Jews, maybe you're quoting this to my Colossian believers here. Maybe you're quoting some of this stuff to them, maybe you're getting them a little bit too interested and enamored with lesser supernatural beings. The message that I want you to get fixed in your mind, you Judaizers, and you Colossians who have received Christ, is very simple: the only Lord is Jesus. There is no higher

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authority. There is no higher figure. So you don't stay in the faith by shifting your allegiance to something else." That's what Paul doesn't want to happen. And we can read between the lines if we know some of this other material that predated the Church in Colossae, that Jews during the Second Temple period were well aware of and could be quoting and spouting off, and going into a Church like Colossae and saying, "Looke here, you guys need to be believing this, and maybe put your faith in or watch out for or honor or worship—something else going on here." Or this whole talk about Jesus: "Well, Jesus wasn't one of *these* guys. He was just a man who lived in Nazareth, and he got crucified, blah, blah blah. If you're looking for some supernatural figure to honor, look around, look at the heavens, look at the skies. God is in control of all of this. Forget about Jesus. It's not that you have to even worship the stars, or anything like that. We don't need to go that far. It's just that Jesus doesn't measure up." And Paul is saying, "Jesus not only measures up, he is preeminent." This is why he goes from this subject matter to verse 9: "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." There's a reason Paul says that. There's something he's leading up to with that statement to nip it in the bud, and it's this kind of stuff. So scholars aren't completely sure, obviously, what the Colossian Heresy is, but it involves this kind of stuff at the very least. That much is known. I'll end with this quote from O'Brien in his *Word Biblical Commentary* on Colossians. He says this:

It is probable that in the syncretistic teaching being advocated at Colossae these *στοιχεῖα* were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man's access to God's presence [MH: I would add, "or his destiny, fate"]. One way [these *stoicheia*] could be placated was by rigorously subduing the flesh so as to gain visionary experiences of the heavenly dimension and to participate in their angelic liturgy (see the discussion on 2:18).

Let me stop there. If you've ever... This is shamanism. "Shamans" is a term I'm hoping many of you are familiar with, but it's these witch doctors and whatnot. There are people who actually, through asceticism or they inflict pain upon themselves to produce an altered state—to get access to the higher realities... Or they take drugs. In the ancient world, asceticism was a big way of doing this. You starve yourself, you go on your ridiculous fasts, you do this or that to your body, you beat yourself... This was all aimed at producing an altered state so that your mind could encounter alternate realities. So O'Brien is suggesting maybe this is in the picture, because in Colossians 2:18 (we'll get there at some point), Paul says:

¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions...

So this could very well be. O'Brien is tracking on this, and we'll get to it in the next episode. But let me just finish his quote. He says, "Don't be thinking they can be placated by all this asceticism."

By [producing these altered states, having these visions] the devotees gained fullness of salvation [MH: or so they thought], reached the divine presence and attained the esoteric knowledge which accompanied such visions. Christ had in effect become just another intermediary between God and man.

And I would say, “or even less.” In other words, if Jesus couldn’t promise this—these visions, these altered states—it would be very easy for mystical Jews and even pagans to say, “Well, lookee over here! We’ve had this experience. These amazing things we’ve seen. Jesus was just a man. He got crucified, and it’s just unfortunate. But you need to be thinking about either these other entities, or just forget about Jesus. You can have some of this spectacular supernatural stuff we’re selling here, metaphorically. You can have these divine encounters that we have and that we know you’d like to have, but Jesus isn’t going to get that for you.” Paul’s message is just real simple. “Don’t be deceived. Don’t be deceived. Don’t follow after these ideas, because in Jesus dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you’re in him. Do that math.”

So we’ll get into more of this the next time. We’ve only hit three verses in this episode, but there’s a lot of stuff here to think about. And hopefully in this episode, you saw a little bit about how scholars ask certain questions about certain passages, and then once again, the importance of reading between the lines, i.e., reading what is said in the text against its own original backdrop (in this case, mystical Judaism and all this angelic stuff lurking in the background.)

TS: Mike, easier said than done, to not be deceived, because I look around and that’s all I see...

MH: [laughs] Yeah, the “experience” stuff is a powerful motivator, but it’s not new.

TS: Yeah, so if you haven’t read *Unseen Realm*, go out and get it now, please. Go. Read the book, please. Alright, Mike, did you mention that we’ll get through the rest of chapter 2 next week?

MH: Yeah, I think there’s a good possibility we will get through chapter 2 next week.

1:10:00 **TS:** Alright, that sounds good. Well, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.