

This morning I've chosen the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossian Church, but let me begin by observing that his letter to the Galatians and his letter to the Colossians sort of serve as bookends in terms of understanding the substance, the dynamics of our faith, the content of our faith. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is taking on the challenge that's presented by the Judaizers. Among these Gentile Christians, they were teaching that in order to be justified before a holy God, one needed to profess faith in Christ and keep to the letter of the law, particularly as it is manifest in the ritual of circumcision. Paul's contention in Galatians is that justification is by God's grace alone which is received by faith alone in the person and work of Christ alone. Now the reason for him writing to the Colossian Church is to counter the Greek-influenced Jewish teaching that spiritual empowerment and spiritual intimacy are present through various human efforts. In other words, these things are attainable, whether it becomes how to deal with temptation or spiritually empowered to do various things. The teachings of these individuals were telling these, again, Gentile converts that apart from faith in Christ, you must do this, that, or the other if you really want to be empowered or to be close to God. Now again, it is my contention that on the one hand, at the beginning of one's journey, what do we believe about the gospel? What do we believe about what it takes to be justified by God is what is addressed. And we know that's always a challenge. But on the flip side of it, another problem that continues to play Christians down throughout the ages is how do I get or experience spiritual empowerment, or how do I know that I am close to God, or how can I get closer to God? So whether it's in regards to our justification, which is the problem challenge that Paul is taking on in the book of Galatians, or whether it relates to our sanctification, which is really what's being addressed in Colossians, Paul's answer is the same. It is what God has given us in Christ. Now, the means by which we are justified before God, on the one hand, is the same thing that enables us to experience intimacy with him. That's Paul's point. That's why I say these are bookends. In other words, if we are justified by faith in Christ, it is also by our faith in Christ that we gain intimacy with God and we are empowered in our spiritual walk. Now, the tendency is for us to lean towards human works, whether it's in justification or in sanctification. Now, we know that those, I know this is a Reformed congregation, and we know that the hallmark of Reformed preaching leans very hard into what Paul says to the Galatians about faith in Christ alone. just did a conference last year on standing firm in the gospel. And we understand the importance of standing on Paul's doctrine of justification and by grace in Christ. And that is the hallmark not only of reformed preaching and teaching, it is the distinguishing mark of Protestant Christians down throughout the ages. But I would argue that just as we lean heavy into the doctrine of justification by grace alone because of Christ alone, we also need to lean hard on the substance of the book of Colossians because here we are also susceptible when it comes to our sanctification, that we know we trust in Christ alone for our justification, but the tendency is to look outside of Christ for our spiritual intimacy with God and for our spiritual empowerment. So we are offered any number of formulas, any number of plans. any number of things that we must do, everything from walking an aisle to making a deeper commitment, rededication, recommitment, oils, laying on of hands. We look to all of these sorts of things as the means by which we can get closer to God, or the means by which we are empowered to walk spiritually in this present world. Now what I've done, and I think what Paul does in the book of Colossians, is point us to Christ and the sufficiency of Christ and

our union with him as the only thing that will enable us to do the things that we have been called to do and to live the life that God has called us to live. And what I've done is I've chosen this one verse because I think it is the apex of everything that Paul has articulated throughout the rest of this letter. And the essence of what he says here is what he fleshes out either by way of implication, indicative statements, and even in the exhortations in the imperative section of this letter. Everything that he sets forth makes the point that Christ is our soul and sufficient supply for intimacy with God and for spiritual empowerment. There is nothing that we need outside of Christ to do what God has called us to do and there is nothing outside of Christ that can make us close with God. Now there are three things that we want to look at here. The first thing is this If the premise of this letter is the sufficiency of our union with Christ, then the problem that's being addressed is really how do we deal with continuing sin. In other words, if Paul's contention here is Christ is sufficient, our union with Christ is sufficient for all things, then the question that's actually being answered is how do we deal with continuing or remaining sin in relation to both our devotion to God as well as our duty to Him. Because certainly our sanctification consists in both our duties, what God has called us to do in His law, and our devotion, our hearts seeking Him and resting in Him and giving Him honor in all things. So if the question, if what is being answered if Paul's answer is that Christ is sufficient, then why is this a problem? And the reason it's a problem is because of the reality of remaining sin. If you look at chapter 3, and particularly in verses five and following, Paul addresses some of those problems that we continue once we come to saving faith. The reality is God announces us to be righteous because he credits to us the righteousness of Christ. But here's our problem. God calls us righteous, but our challenge internally is that we don't always feel righteous. And we don't always act it. Look at what he tells believers to put off in chapter 3, beginning in verse 5. In chapter 3, Paul says, beginning in verse 5, he says, put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these, the wrath of God is coming. In these, he says, you too once walked when you were living in them, but now you must put them off. Why do we put them off? So that we can be accepted before God? No. You are already accepted before God. But yet, even though God has declared you to be righteous, here are your challenges. He goes on to say, now you must put them all away. Anger? wrath, malice, slander, all of these things we are capable of doing even though we possess genuine, legitimate faith in Christ. Here's the issue, and we see also in chapter two, verses 16 through 18, some of the solutions that are offered by these false teachers in dealing with the indulgences that Paul addresses in chapter three. Look in verses 16 through 18 here. He says, 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 things are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you. insisting on asceticism and the worship of angels and going on in details about visions. Brothers and sisters, here's the problem. If the problem is remaining sin, dealing with those things that Paul addresses in chapter three, putting to death those deeds that are still in you and that you wrestle with even though your faith is in Christ, Then here's, so how do we deal with these things? And here's what these false teachers were saying. What you need is more quiet time. What you need is to go to this retreat or go to that conference. What you need to do is keep a journal. And I'm not saying any of these things are wrong in and of themselves. But

the point here is that they are not what empower us. The quiet time that you have in the morning is good. Your prayer before you lay down at night, that's good, but that doesn't make you close. It's in light of the closeness that you have with God and in light of everything that you have with God because of Christ. So here's the issue. If the point that's being made here, if the premise of this letter is that spiritual empowerment is not by these external things, then the question is, how then do I deal with remaining sin. Because no matter how spiritual I am, everything that Paul says in chapter 3 verses 5 and following can be true of any of us. It doesn't feel good to say it, but it's true. Wrath can be in you. Sexual immorality can be in you. and you can deal with these things, and that is a reality. You can be guilty of these things, and we feel guilty because of it. So the question is, if these are the things that I am prone to, then how do I get rid of it? And hold in mind, on the flip side of it, the need for spiritual empowerment and the reaffirmation of spiritual intimacy is not just at our point of temptation. but also at our point of trial, when we go back and forth over health issues, family issues, and we wonder if maybe the Lord is trying to get back at me because I failed to do this. Maybe that's why my children are wayward. Maybe that's why my, and so maybe I need to do something towards God, showing that I'm serious that will cause these storms to cease and my trials to end. Step in all of these other formulas, all of these other things, whether it's the worship of angels, whether it's observing certain feast days. These were the things that were being offered as the means of people dealing with either internal temptations or trials, trials of life. But here's the second thing. If this is the case, if the problem of how to deal with remaining sin, if that is the problem, what's being amplified here is that the solutions that's being offered by these false teachers have the appearance of wisdom. That's what Paul says in verse 23. He says, these things, they have an appearance of wisdom. So they have a sense of an air of plausibility. You know what? That is true. I need to fast more. That is true. I used to get up every morning and pray before dawn. And now that I haven't, look at what's going on in my life. So therefore, I need to do this. Yeah, I don't need to have this, that, or the other. And so we think that somehow these external things are enough. And so they make sense. That's what Paul says. They have the air of plausibility. So it seems, of course, you would worship an angel. An angel is more powerful than you. They're closer to God, right? That's what we think when we see these things. But again, here's what Paul says. These things have the appearance of wisdom, But he says, in the end, this self-made religion, this asceticism, this severity to the body, they are of no value in stopping the indulgences of the flesh. So it might seem like, it might have the appearance that this should work, that if I'm struggling with temptation, then I need to do this externally, and the temptation will go away. That if I'm going through this trial, and it seems like we've been down this road before, and I keep, then maybe I need to do this. Maybe I need to go back to X, Y, Z. So again, here's the first two things. The reason for this letter is because the Colossian Christians, like all of us, were dealing with the reality of remaining sin. Unfortunately for us, when the Lord calls us to saving faith, he doesn't just take us straight to heaven. He leaves us in these same dirty streets. He leaves us in bodies that are still deteriorating. He leaves us in sometimes the same relationships And so the issue is now, how do I deal with these things? And so if the question is, how do I deal with remaining sin, here's the problem. The offers or the solution that was being offered by the false teachers seemed to make sense. They seemed plausible. But the reality is they are of no value. in dealing

with the temptations or the indulgences of the flesh. Well, then that brings us to the third thing. What Paul does in dealing with these Colossian Christians, and I think even for us, is he offers as a suitable solution, not another program, not another plan, not another set of rules, But what he offers is a simple proclamation. And the proclamation that I offer to you, if you as a believer who believe and embrace the gospel of God's grace in the person of Jesus Christ, and you're dealing with continuing temptation in a particular area, and you're dealing with a particular set of trials that seems insurmountable for you, that I offer what Paul offers. You, brother and sister, are complete in him. And the him in whom you are complete is the head of all principality, all authority. And here's what you'll do. You'll look at yourself and you'll say, whoa, wait a minute. I don't feel complete. I feel broken. But yet, Paul says, you are complete. And so my argument then would be what he does is he outlines, especially in the first two chapters, and then in the first four chapters or verses of chapter three, he outlines all of what it means for us individually who are united to Christ by faith. And this is why I say that your union with Christ is sufficient. It's sufficient for your trials, and it's sufficient for your season of temptation. So let's look at some of the things, and we'll categorize them or look at them in three directions in terms of what it means for us to be complete in Christ. Because earlier in chapter 2, when he says that we are to be built up and grounded in the truth, this is the truth we need to be grounded in, because this is our help, and this is our solution in our season of trial. in our season of temptation. First off, here's what we need to know. No matter what your temptation is, no matter what your trial is, understand, as he says in verse 14, the record of your debt that stood against you with its legal demands has been set aside and has been nailed to the cross. Understand that as you look by faith to Christ, then the debt that stood against you, and with all of its demands, has already been set aside, and it's nailed to the cross. So whatever your challenge is, is not because you owe God anything else. It's not because somehow that sin is not covered. Understand what it means to be complete in Christ is to know that all of your sins, past, present, and future, every aspect of your being in violation of God's law in thought, in word, and in deed, everything that has been owed by you to God's holy law, and you have failed to keep it, has already been set aside. And the reason we know that it's been set aside, it's nailed to the cross. So whatever the reason for your trial is not because God is mad at you. It's not because his wrath is kindled against you. He chastens, but his wrath has been set aside because he looked at his son as if his son were as guilty as you, so that he could look at you as if you were as pure as his son. To be complete in him is to be grounded in the knowledge that all of your debt towards God has been paid off by the body and blood of your Savior. But here's the second thing. In chapter 1, verses 12 through 14, Paul gives us three other things that are true of us if our faith is in Christ. One, he says, we've been qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. Qualified. I know, we don't feel, I'm not worthy of this. But no, you've been pre-qualified. So everything that is necessary to be set apart with the saints in light, you've already been qualified. So God is not, and here again is where worldly thinking comes into spiritual things. And I love, by the way, the movie It's a Wonderful Life. It's a great movie, but horrible theology. Clarence the angel is working to get wings. Now, even though many Christians don't, you know, we rightfully know that you don't, humans, angels don't become, they are created. So no human, when you die, you don't become an angel, and then you graduate up the

scale in terms of what kind of angel you are going to be. But here's the part that flavors even still a lot of contemporary theology, that if you do enough, then God will reward you Brothers and sisters, here's what Paul tells us. The whole weight of your debt against God has been set aside and you have already been qualified for the saints in light. God is not taking you through your trial so that He is taking you through your trial, period. Whatever it is, he's there. But he's not taking you through it so you can earn wings. You've been qualified. But then Paul goes on. I said three. It's actually four things that he lists in verses 12 through 14. He says, first, that you have already been qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints and light. But then he says, secondly, that you've been delivered from the domain of darkness. You've been delivered. I know it's, again, common in evangelical circles to have deliverance services. Brothers and sisters, you are delivered already. You don't have to go to a certain service for that. You don't have to go down the aisle to receive your deliverance. receiving Christ by faith, you have already been delivered, and you've been delivered from this kingdom of darkness. But thirdly, he says not only have you been delivered from the domain of darkness, you've been, again past tense, all of this is past tense, you've been transferred into the kingdom of of his beloved son. So whatever, again, the trial that you're going through, it's not going to keep you from the kingdom because you've been transferred into it. Whatever temptation that you struggle with, it's not going to disqualify you because you've been qualified. And so lighting candles, receiving oil on the head, is not going to give you anything with God, because you've been given everything in Christ. You've been delivered from the domain of darkness. You've been transferred into the kingdom of his beloved son. And then fourthly, he says, you have been given redemption, which means You have the forgiveness of sins. So again, here's what Paul says. What does it mean to be complete? To be complete in him means that the record of your debt has been set aside. It means that you have been qualified. You have been transferred. You've been delivered. You've been redeemed. All of that is ours by virtue of our faith in Christ. But then here's a third and final thing. To be complete in Christ means that we, according to Paul in chapter three, verses one through four, it means that we have been raised with him. That's the same language that Paul uses in Romans chapter six. He says that we who have been baptized in him, we've been crucified with Christ. And if we've been crucified with him, then we have also been raised with him. And in Romans 6, he says, so that we can now walk in newness of life. We have been raised with him. And notice this, we are seated with him in heavenly places. We who have been raised have been seated. And oftentimes, again, we look towards his coming when he comes, but part of the living out of our faith is from the vantage point, not of trying to get home, but it's from the vantage point of us presently being seated with Christ at the right hand of God. Paul says, we have died. And right now, our life is hidden with Christ. And that's why he says, you need to train your mind and your affections, not just towards where you're going, but to where you presently are seated. Let your affections be governed from the vantage point of the right hand of the Father with whom you are seated in Christ. Let your thoughts be governed. That's what enables us to put to death the deeds of the flesh, as we look at the flesh from the vantage point, not from the ground up, but from our exalted position of being seated in Christ. Now look back at yourself through that vantage point. But he goes on to say, not only are our lives hidden in Christ, but he gives us this little nugget, that when he appears, when he appears, we will appear with him also in glory. Brothers and sisters, this

proclamation that Paul makes in our text, and you are complete in him, you are filled in him, that is a reminder to us This is the mystery of God that Paul alludes to in verse two. This is the mystery which is in Christ. In this context, this whole statement, this proclamation that you are complete in him, that is our resource. It's our assurance. And it's what keeps us from being deluded by anything else. Here is the hard truth of the gospel. I know it's good news, but here's this good news. Brothers and sisters, I know your struggles are real. I know your temptations are real, but here's the truth of the matter. You are now no closer to God than you will be when the Lord returns. Why? Because Christ is seated. So don't let anyone make you think that somehow your trial, your temptation, your failure in temptation has somehow sent you to the back of the line. No, you are in Christ. And if you are in him, then you're complete. And the life that we live is out of our being complete in him. The power against temptation and the comfort in the midst of our trials is the knowledge that God sees us seated at the right hand of the Father. And when he comes, we're not hoping to be in glory. When he comes, when he returns, just as he is in glory, So we shall be also a peer in the glory of the one in whom we are now complete. Your temptations are real, and your failures are real. Your trials are real. And sometimes we do get the cell phone thing about it. Are you with me? Are you here? Are you here? Are you here? Do you hear me, Lord? Brothers and sisters, he hears you because you are filled in him. We don't always know what he's doing, but I can tell you what he's not doing. He's not turning his back on you, and he's not turning his face away from you. Here's what we do need, not more of, but a better grasp of the facts of the gospel that's given to us. So that's why Paul could say, I know how to be abound, and I know how to abound, and I know how to be abased. And it's amazing how we've taken the one verse out of context, or one statement out of context. I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me. And that includes suffering. That includes enjoying plenty. And it includes going through the valley of the shadow of death. And it includes anything else I can experience because here's my confidence. Here's what I know. Whatever the Lord puts in my path, it's not because, it's not out of his wrath and his love for me. is an unchanging love. So Paul is admonishing these Colossian Christians, you don't need a blessing line. You don't need another anointing. You don't need oil on the head. You don't need someone interceding. You have one intercessor, and that's Jesus Christ. And you are complete in him, who is the head of all principalities. And therefore, there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ. Not things past, not things present, not things in the future. No principality, nor power, nor authority. Nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ. Therefore, you are complete in him, and he is the head of all principality. Let's pray. Our God and our Father, we come to you. In the blessed name of our Savior, And we thank you for your word. As fallen creatures in a fallen world, we are prone to judge ourselves wrongly. In our fallenness, we think we are more than what we are. And then even in our grasp of your grace, we tend to think we are less than what we are. We pray that by your spirit and through your word, you would remind us of who we truly are in Christ. And as you have connected us to the body, we pray, oh God, that whether in seasons of trial or in the seasons of temptation, that we would not think that we need something else, that we are complete. Our grasp is not always as good as it could be or should be. So speak to us through your appointed means. Let us know that all of our sins are forgiven and that we are your beloved children as we are seen in him. Let that be our comfort against the indulgences of the flesh Let that be our

comfort in the midst of our greatest trials, that we are complete. And whatever it is that we are experiencing is not of your wrath, but it is to be filtered through your love. We ask these things in Jesus' name, amen.