

Colossians 2

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, August 20, 2023
PASSAGES	Colossians 2; Matthew 11:25-26; Galatians 4:3; Matthew 8:5-13
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:18:04 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Faith is not the word Christians reach for once they have run out of reasons. Paul warns the church at Colossae about arguments that sound wonderful and are not true — and then spends the rest of the chapter showing that the wisdom, the forgiveness, the freedom and the substance they are being offered elsewhere are already theirs in Christ.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ “You just have to take it on faith” is one of the most commonly cited reasons people give for leaving the church they grew up in. The intent behind it is usually kind. The effect is not.
- ◆ “Plausible arguments” in verse four is not a compliment to the arguments. The word describes how persuasive they are, not whether they are any good. A person can out-talk you and still be wrong.
- ◆ The treasures of wisdom hidden in Christ are not a secret kept from ordinary people. They are hidden from the proud, and pride is the one thing that reliably makes the wisdom of God look like foolishness.
- ◆ The “elemental spirits” Paul warns about are better read as the condition we were enslaved to before Christ than as a roster of demons. We are slaves to sin, not slaves to Satan.
- ◆ Sin has legal demands. That is why the cross was necessary and why God could not simply wave the record of debt away — and it is the point most of us quietly do not believe about our own sin.
- ◆ The first century wanted to punish the body to prove it was spiritual. Our culture wants to indulge it. Paul says the rules never worked, and Christ is the substance that the rules were only ever a shadow of.

- ◆ Faith, in the New Testament, could almost always be translated *trust* — and trust always has an object and a reason. The centurion had both.
- ◆ The close was not “try harder,” it was *put your money where your mouth is* — and the payoff Wes wanted from it was corporate: a church that watches its own people live consistently and concludes *I could do that too*.

► 1:18:04

On a Sunday when the church had already baptized new believers, Wes took the room through Paul's second chapter to the church at Colossae in one pass — who these people were, what Paul wanted from them, and what he was afraid of. He began, though, with something that annoys him.

1. “Just have faith” is not an answer

► 1:20:44

Television cannot write a believable minister. Wes's example was Father Wesley from *Psych* — a character he likes partly because they share a name — who gets cornered by the show's lead over Noah's ark and the penguins, runs out of road, and finally says: it's just about faith. Which means, Wes pointed out, *I don't have an answer for you, so believe it because I said so*.

That fictional moment is a real one. Read enough testimonies from people who grew up in the faith and walked away and the same scene keeps recurring: a hard question, a trusted adult, and an answer that amounted to closing your eyes. The instinct behind it is good — we really are asked to trust God — but it is not what the word means.

“It does make sense, and that's why we believe it,” Wes said. “Not the other way around.”

2. A man struggling for people he has never met

► 1:21:12

“For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

COLOSSIANS 2:1–5 ↗

Some readers take that line about faces to mean Paul never planted this church and may never have set foot in the city. Either way he plainly does not know everyone he is writing to, and he tells them he is laboring for them anyway. Wes wanted the room to feel how strange and good that is: a church body you belong to here, and a common link with believers you have never met that should make you at home in their room too.

3. Plausible does not mean good

► 1:23:32

Then the hinge of the chapter, and the phrase Wes spent the most time on: *that no one may delude you with plausible arguments*. Other translations have “fine-sounding” or “persuasive.” Taken uncharitably it reads as a warning against good arguments — proof that the Bible wants you switched off. But the adjective is not grading the argument's merit. It is describing its effect.

His illustration was from being eight or nine years old, when an older kid told him he didn't believe Wes's mother was a real person. Prove she exists. He couldn't. Devastating in the moment, and completely stupid. Persuasion and truth are separate properties, and any of us can be put in a room with someone quicker, better read and more eloquent, walk out shaken, and have lost nothing but the argument.

“Christ is the best argument,” Wes said. “There is nothing more persuasive than Christ in his true form.”

4. Hidden — and who does the hiding

► 1:27:48

If Christ came to be proclaimed, why does verse three say the treasures are *hidden* in him? Wes heard Paul echoing Jesus:

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”

MATTHEW 11:25-26 ↗

Jesus says that immediately after the cities around Galilee have turned him down — the people with the scriptures, the prophecies and the calendar of what was supposed to happen. Meanwhile a Roman centurion who knew none of it drew from him the line that he had not found such faith in all

of Israel. Wes's read: God has very little patience for pride, because pride is the sin that quietly promotes you to his level. Tell God his arguments are foolish and you have said you are smarter than he is.

So the wisdom is not a well-kept secret. “It's hidden only because of the visors of pride that we've put up before us.”

5. Elemental spirits, or elemental forces

► 1:31:19

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

COLOSSIANS 2:6–8 ↗

Wes admitted he stopped at that third item. The phrase turns up in only one other place in Paul, where believers are described as having been enslaved to the elemental things of the world before Christ — and that comparison decided it for him. Read the phrase as demons and you end up saying we were the property of Satan before conversion. Read it as elemental *forces* — a condition, a state of nature that philosophy and empty deceit grow out of — and it fits what scripture actually says. “We're not slaves to Satan and his minions. We're slaves to sin.” He was careful to leave the first reading on the table as possible rather than wrong.

6. The debt had legal demands

► 1:35:13

Paul then says that in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and reaches for circumcision — the practice that marked the Jewish people out as different — to describe what baptism now does.

“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

COLOSSIANS 2:13–15 ↗

► 1:38:37

Wes would not let the phrase *legal demands* go by. People ask why an all-powerful God cannot simply press reset — forgive everyone, cancel sin, skip the part where his Son dies. It sounds plausible. It is, he argued, the same sentence as a friend watching a murder conviction come in and saying: let him go, sweep it under the rug, he'll do better next time. You would look at that person and wonder what had happened to them. Something has to be done.

► 1:41:02

Why we do not feel it is the interesting part. When sin has a visible object — I stole from him, I spoke badly about her — we know instinctively that something is owed. When it is private, or hurts only us, we file it as a victimless crime. “All sin is directly sin against God himself,” Wes said, “and that's where the legal demands come from.” We are almost programmed to think our sin is small, and the recompense owed is far past what we could pay. Which is why Christ had to come down.

7. Shadows, angels and severity to the body

► 1:42:50

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

COLOSSIANS 2:16–17 ↗

These were live questions then in a way they are not now. If becoming a Christian usually meant you had been Jewish first, how much of the old law came with you — the food, the feasts, the Sabbath? Nobody is arguing about pork in Austin this week. We have two thousand years of distance, and Paul's answer is freedom.

► 1:43:25

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

COLOSSIANS 2:18–19 ↗

► 1:46:53

The two things Paul names there — asceticism and the worship of angels — take more translating. Greek thought treated the body as low and the flesh as the problem, which is why the idea of God becoming a man was a non-starter for so many: flesh is evil, God becomes flesh, and the sentence stops. That is the gnostic problem that John's gospel and John's letters keep circling, and it ran far enough that whole churches ended up saying Jesus was still God but never human — a spirit that merely looked like one. The respectable response for everyone else was to deprive the body: eat only what keeps you alive, wear the plainest thing, want nothing earthly — and be looked at. “Wow, what a wise and understanding person. He's figured life out.”

► 1:47:55

Others took the syncretist route instead, and Rome's instinct toward a new religion was acquisitive: “Oh, Christianity — another religion, how wonderful. Another source of wisdom and knowledge.” So take their angels, add them to the pantheon, make Jesus one of the angels since he cannot have been human, and expect elaborate reports of visions to follow. Both were real threats and both led people away. Paul's reply in either direction is the same — “don't mess with any of these things, because the truth is in Christ; nothing else is” — and what he offers in place of the rules is not a better rule. It is a body holding fast to its Head, knit together and growing with a growth that comes from God.

8. Faith you could almost translate as trust

► 1:49:54

Here the message came back to where it started. Swap the word *faith* for *trust* through most of the New Testament, Wes suggested, and you lose very little. The centurion did not perform an act of blind belief. He had watched Jesus do this before, he reasoned about what that meant, and he concluded that a word spoken at a distance would be enough. That is what Jesus commends. There was a reason under it.

And the reason runs backward as well as forward: “we have faith in him because he did it first — he was killed and rose again.” It is the same with the Gentiles who came asking him to heal somebody else. Their case was that they had seen him do it for other people, and that is precisely what Jesus called faith.

The reasons we are offered against Christ, Wes noted, all run on logic — which he did not invent. “I'm going to trust the person who literally invented how logic works.” Which leaves the honest position when a believer brings a question nobody in the room can answer: not *accept it blindly and hope*, but *I might not know, and he does*. “If God himself says something is true even though I don't understand it, that's a failing on my part, not his.”

9. Put your money where your mouth is

► 1:53:25

“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations — ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’... These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

COLOSSIANS 2:20-23 ↗

Paul's close is blunt, and Wes matched it. If you believe a man who was God died two thousand years ago and rose, why are you not living like it? He was careful about what he meant. Being thought of as a nice person who never hurt anybody is not a bad outcome — he would like that himself — but it is not the outcome. He wants people who know him to say that he acts in accordance with what he claims to believe, because if it is true it should show.

► 1:55:59

And the rules our culture presses on us run the opposite way from Colossae's. Nobody is telling you to eat bland food for the good of your soul; we are told to work hard, acquire, and fill every appetite we have. Paul's verdict lands on both: the ascetic program and the consumer one look like answers and neither one can stop the indulgence of the flesh. The middle ground Wes named is not moderation between the two — it is Christ as the thing that goes into everything you do. “Nothing in my experience turns people off from Christianity more than the hypocritical Christian who says they love Christ and acts in a way that is completely counter to that.”

► 1:56:38

He ended on the charge rather than a summary. “May we not be people who just follow the culture and just pay lip service to the gospel. May we be people who follow the gospel with everything that we have” — so that when someone asks about our faith we can tell them it has good reason under it, and that where we do not know the answer, God does and he is the one who said it. The last thing he asked for was the smallest and the most communal: that a church watching its own people live this way would take confidence from it and think, *that person did a great thing, I can follow that*. Then he prayed over the room and over a school year just starting — that the people heading into it would be filled with a passion to learn about this world God made for them to discover.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Colossians 2:1–5
- Matthew 11:25–26
- Matthew 8:5–13
- Colossians 2:6–8
- Galatians 4:3
- Colossians 2:9–10
- Colossians 2:13–15
- Colossians 2:16–17
- Colossians 2:18–19
- 1 John
- Colossians 2:20–23

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What is the hard question about the faith that you have never gotten a satisfying answer to — and who did you last ask?
2. Think of a time someone out-argued you about something you believed. What did that do to you afterward, and what would you say to them now?
3. Wes said pride is what makes the wisdom of Christ look like foolishness. Where is your own pride most likely to be working as a visor?
4. Do you actually believe your private sin has legal demands attached to it, or do you file it as a victimless crime? Be honest about which.
5. If someone who knows you well watched your week, what would they conclude you believe about Jesus — and what one thing would you change this week to close that gap?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely gave this Sunday's teaching at Hope Chapel and ran the church's team trivia night, writing the questions himself — he spent an hour walking every room in the building to count the chairs, and can tell you there are 323 of them and 46 parking spaces outside. He describes himself as a young person who grew up as the internet moved from a printed-out map on the family computer to the phone in his pocket, and he plans to help at the fall seminar on technology and family life.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlxsDLqU1gs&t=4684s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.