



## Christian Origins #70 - Colossians

by Ronald L. Dart

I realize that Old Testament law poses some *really sticky* problems. For example, there's a law back there that regulates the conditions under which a man can *sell his daughter*. What do you *do* about laws like that? (Well, I'll admit I've known some fathers of teenage daughters to whom that idea is somewhat attractive, but you can't do that.) And there's another law that requires us to wear a blue tassel on our clothes. Does modern man have to do that? And what about the law that says you can't wear a garment of mixed fabric? You've got to get rid of those slacks that are wool and something else?

Almost everyone agrees that Christians don't have to do that, but the reasons *why* they believe it are widely varied and sometimes downright colorful—and usually they're wrong. Take a passage, for example, out of Paul's letter to the faithful in Colossae—Colossians 2, verse 13. He says:

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

<sup>14</sup> Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

Now, according to one line of thought, the “handwriting of ordinances” is the Law—including the Ten Commandments. Now, you ought to *immediately* know that something is wrong somewhere when someone tells you that the commandment “Thou shalt not steal” was nailed to the cross and abolished. You might not think much if he told you that the law about the blue tassel was abolished, but “Thou shalt not bear false witness” seems to be an eternal principle, and why would anyone want to do away with that?

So what's wrong with this idea? Well, first of all, you have to just notice the structure of the sentence you just read. He says:

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, [...]

What is it that made you dead? Well, it was *sin*. He said:

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> [...] has he quickened [*he has given you life*] together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

<sup>14</sup> Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us [...]

Now, the way this is laid out, it's easy to understand: "Forgiving us our trespasses" and "blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that were against us" are two phrases that say the same thing. (If you remember your high school English, they are *appositives*.) God forgives us. How does he do that? He does it by blotting out the charges that are written down against us. So in other words, blotting out the handwriting is not the abolition of Law; it's the forgiveness of sin. And, if you noticed in this passage of scripture, the *forgiveness of sin* was what he was talking about in the first place.

Now, Paul is a man *deeply* versed in the Old Testament, and a lot of people don't understand Paul because they know nothing of his allusions to the Old Testament. This blotting out of sins is an Old Testament idea; it comes from a curious ceremony described in the fifth chapter of Numbers. I'll begin reading in verse 12. God says:

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, If any man's wife go aside, and commit a trespass against him,

<sup>13</sup> And a man lie with her carnally, and it be hid from the eyes of her husband, [...]

In other words, she's gone out and had an affair and her husband doesn't know it.

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> [...] and be kept close, and she be defiled, and there be no witness against her, neither she be taken with the manner;

In other words, nobody discovered it. Nobody can *prove anything*. In the Old Testament, witnesses were *crucial*. You couldn't condemn a person on a hunch. They didn't know much about circumstantial evidence; there had to be *witnesses*. Then he goes on to say:

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>14</sup> And the spirit of jealousy come on him, and he be jealous of his wife, and she be defiled: or if the spirit of jealousy come on him, and he be jealous of his wife, and she be not defiled:

Now, there's nothing unusual about this. I mean, jealous husbands are as old as husbands are. And sometimes they have reasons, and sometimes they don't. And so what God is saying to Moses here is: "Here's how we're going to handle this little problem when a man is jealous of his wife—whether she's guilty, or whether she's innocent." Okay, here's what he does:

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>15</sup> Then shall the man bring his wife to the priest, and he shall bring her offering for her, the tenth part of an ephah of barley meal; he shall pour no oil on it, nor put frankincense thereon; for it is an offering of jealousy, an offering of memorial, bringing iniquity to remembrance.

In other words, this is not a *happy* offering; no joy is found in this ceremony. You can't make it better with oil and perfumes, so don't bother.

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>16</sup> And the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the LORD:

<sup>17</sup> And the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel; and of the dust that is in the floor of the tabernacle the priest shall take, and put it into the water:

Just a little dust, nothing else. No poison, no hemlock, nothing like that.

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>18</sup> And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD, and uncover the woman's head, and put the offering of memorial in her hands, which is the jealousy offering: and the priest shall have in his hand the bitter water that causes the curse:

So you visualize this woman formally sat before God, holding an offering in her hands; and the priest standing in front of her with an earthen bowl, with water, with a little dust that he has put in it. This puts the woman formally on trial before God. She is making an offering which, if she is *guilty* in making the offering, brings double guilt upon her head. Making an offering to God in a *lying* state is very, very serious business, indeed.

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>19</sup> And the priest shall charge her by an oath, and say to the woman, If no man have lain with you, and if you have not gone aside to uncleanness with another instead of your husband, be you free from this bitter water that causes the curse:

<sup>20</sup> But if you have gone aside to another instead of your husband, and if you be defiled, and some man have lain with you beside your husband:

<sup>21</sup> Then the priest shall charge the woman with an oath of cursing, and the priest shall say to the woman, The LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD does make your thigh to rot, and your belly to swell;

Huh, that doesn't something very nice, does it? Well, I don't know what that all involved. It sounds bad enough. The priest continues:

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>22</sup> And this water that causes the curse shall go into your bowels, to make your belly to swell, and your thigh to rot: And the woman shall say, Amen, amen.

She's to agree to this. By this time, I would think a guilty woman would *really* be starting to sweat. But now follows the interesting part, from the point of view of what we're asking about Colossians and Old Testament laws:

**Numbers 5**

AKJV

<sup>23</sup> And the priest shall write these curses in a book, and he shall blot them out with the bitter water:

Now, this is really fascinating. Because, of course, any kind of writing that was done in the old days was *handwriting*. (They didn't have word processors or typewriters in those days, of course.) So in other words, what he did was write them down by hand—the curses—in a book. Then he takes the bitter water he's got there and he *blots out* them—he washes them off the page. This is probably the

oldest example of the presumption of innocence in written law. Notice that what was written down was *the curse that came because of sin*. It wasn't the law that he wrote down; it was the curse.

### Numbers 5

AKJV

<sup>21</sup> [...] The LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD does make your thigh to rot, and your belly to swell[.]

I presume that's what he wrote down and then washed away. Her sin, if guilty, was twofold: She was guilty of adultery, and she was guilty of presenting herself as innocent before God in holding the offering in her hand. Now, consider, this is a very important thing: The priest wrote the curse down and then *before* the trial of jealousy blotted it out. The woman was presumed innocent.

Now, mind you, trial by ordeal is a very, very old idea; but it's usually done with the presumption of guilt. For example, if they had a witch in the old days, they would throw her in the lake. (I don't know if they put anvils around her ankles, or what. But they threw in the lake.) If she sank and drowned, she was innocent. If she floats, she's guilty. If you have a suspect of being a witch, you give her a vial of poison to drink. If she dies, she's innocent. If she lives, she's a witch. You know, that's a pretty hard way to go. You're dead, in any case, if you're even *accused* in these circumstances, because you are *presumed guilty*. Now, in this case though—in the case of the trial of jealousy in the Bible—the water was harmless unless there was *a miracle* to make it harmful.

### Numbers 5

AKJV

<sup>24</sup> And he shall cause the woman to drink the bitter water that causes the curse: [...]

Okay, what is this bitter water that causes the curse? Well, it's a bowl—a cup—of clean water with a little dust from the floor of the Tabernacle in it. That's all there is to it.

### Numbers 5

AKJV

<sup>25</sup> Then the priest shall take the jealousy offering out of the woman's hand, and shall wave the offering before the LORD, and offer it on the altar:

<sup>26</sup> And the priest shall take an handful of the offering, even the memorial thereof, and burn it on the altar, and afterward shall cause the woman to drink the water.

<sup>27</sup> And when he has made her to drink the water, then it shall come to pass, that, if she be defiled, and have done trespass against her husband, that the water that causes the curse shall enter into her, and become bitter [*poison*], and her belly shall swell, and her thigh shall rot: and the woman shall be a curse among her people.

Do you realize what we're talking about? That *that* water had to somehow be *transformed* miraculously for her to be found guilty. All things being equal, she wouldn't be.

### Numbers 5

AKJV

<sup>28</sup> And if the woman be not defiled, but be clean; then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed.

<sup>29</sup> This is the law of jealousies, when a wife goes aside to another instead of her husband, and is defiled;

<sup>30</sup> Or when the spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he be jealous over his wife, and shall set

the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall execute on her all this law.

<sup>31</sup> Then shall the man be guiltless from iniquity, and this woman shall bear her iniquity.

Now, what's important from this passage, for *our* enquiry, is the handwriting of the curse in the book and the blotting out of the handwriting that was against the woman—that was contrary to her—in the presumption of innocence. Now, let's return to Colossians 2:13 again and see what Paul is saying. He says:

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has he quickened [*energized*] together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

<sup>14</sup> Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross[.]

Now, of special interest here is the Greek expression for “handwriting of ordinances” [*cheirographon tois dogmasin*]. It's a phrase that means roughly “a warrant”—a written document that outlines the penalties for the transgression of law. So what was nailed to the cross? It wasn't *the law* that was nailed there; it was *the curse* that was nailed there. How hard is this?

Now, there's an allusion to this—an interesting one—in Galatians, as well, where Paul says to the Galatians (in chapter 3, verse 13):

### Galatians 3

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree[.]

Notice what it is we are redeemed from—what we are forgiven for—is the curse of the law, the *handwritten curse* that is blotted out. Now, what was nailed to the cross? Well, by all the gospel accounts, *Christ* was nailed there. It was the curse of the law that was nailed to the cross—the curse that comes from *breaking* the law—not the law itself.

Now, this next section opens up with a big “therefore”. And any time I find a “therefore”, I naturally go back to find out what it is we're therefore-ing about. And in this case, it's the section we just went over. He says:

### Colossians 2

KJ2000

<sup>16</sup> Let no man therefore judge you in food, or in drink [*in eating or in drinking*], [...]

Now, before I go on, I want to back up and look at the “therefore” question. He says, “*therefore* let no man judge you”. Why? Well, because you have been forgiven all your trespasses. The handwriting of decrees that was against you has been blotted out. The things that were contrary to you have been taken out of the way and nailed to the cross. And he's gotten rid of all of that; he's gotten rid of all your sins. *Therefore*, let no man judge you in eating and drinking.

Now, somehow or other (and it seems to arise from something deep in human nature, because it finds expression in most religious faiths in one way or another—in one heresy or another, one sect or another, one cult or another)...that somehow—because we are so bad, so rotten, so filthy—that we shouldn't ever be able to enjoy ourselves: that we should fast a lot, that we should eat hard foods, that we should

not have feasts and celebrations with balloons and streamers and all those good things that go along with them. So apparently, in the heresy that was taking root in Colossae, there were these ascetic self-denials—all these things that seem to have to do with making yourself miserable—that had found expression. Now, Paul says: Why should you go around, day by day, mourning over your sins? Why should you be having to do without, or eat bad food, or fast a lot because of the fact that you're a sinner? Because Christ has forgiven you of your sins. He's *blotted out* your sins. He's done *all that stuff*, and he's got out of his way, and he took the curse that was against you and he *nailed it* to his cross—in his own body.

## Colossians 2

KJ2000

<sup>16</sup> Let no man therefore judge you in food, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days:

<sup>17</sup> Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

Now, this is really interesting because this reference to the holy days and new moons and sabbath days...you realize that these are all occasions for *celebration*. The Sabbath was a day when you weren't supposed to fast; you were supposed to feast. And of all the holy days, there was only one of them (the Day of Atonement) in which people fasted. Every other day was a feast. In fact, all kinds of labor was permitted on these holy days for the *preparation of food*, because we were to eat and to drink and to be merry and to celebrate before our God.

Now, this is really curious because this passage is often cited to say that the Law was done away, especially the law regarding holy days. Shall I read it again for you to see where the abolition comes in? He says:

## Colossians 2

KJ2000

<sup>16</sup> Let no man therefore judge you in food, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days:

<sup>17</sup> Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

Where's the abolition? Where's the statement that these are done away—that you're not supposed to do them anymore? This passage doesn't say that. That's a *deduction* arrived at from the *presumption* that the Law was nailed to the cross. And we've already seen that it was not the Law that was nailed there; it was *the curse* that was nailed there.

The translations of this passage usually proceed from certain theological assumptions, but I want you to take a look—just listen—to a *literal* translation of this verse, and we'll consider it in the light of what follows:

## Colossians 2

<sup>16</sup> Let no man therefore judge you in eating, or in drinking, or in part of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days:

<sup>17</sup> (Which are a shadow of things to come); but the body of Christ.

Now, the structure of this sentence simply says that the holy days, the new moons, and the sabbath days are shadows of things to come. In other words, they were shadows of things that were *future* at the time Paul wrote that. Now, many people are prone to say, "Well, these things were fulfilled. And things that *haven't* been fulfilled should be done, and things that *have* been fulfilled should not be." Well, if you

take this literally here, it took simply means the Sabbath and the new moons are shadows of things *yet* to come. Therefore, they haven't been fulfilled yet. I'm not really sure what theologians should make of this question of them being shadows; but what's interesting is that you were not to be judged for the *celebration* part of a holy day, the new moon, or the Sabbath days. He says, "Let no *man* therefore judge you; but the body of Christ", which is the way this seems to be constructed. The problem is not about God's judgment, though, or Christ's. It's about *man's* judgment.

Now, if you look carefully at the passage, you'll see this. It says: Don't let any *man* judge you for eating, drinking, or in matters of the holy days. Eating and drinking *have not been abolished*. And the striking about this passage, when you stop and you read it and you think about what you're seeing, it reveals the startling fact that the saints at Colossae were observing the Sabbath, that new moon, and the holy days. And they were told not to accept criticism for feasting on these days.

Now, how could I be sure that that was Paul's intent? Well, I think it's pretty clear from what follows in this second chapter, verse eighteen:

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>18</sup> Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

In other words, they're creating this whole new idea of humbling yourself and a voluntary humility—this fasting.

### Colossians 2

KJ2000

<sup>19</sup> And not holding the Head, from whom all the body by joints and ligaments having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increases with the increase of God.

<sup>20</sup> Therefore if you be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are you subject to ordinances,

Ah, here we go! We're not supposed to be subject to ordinances, right? Right. Which are these? Well, he says it in verse 21:

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>21</sup> (Touch not; taste not; handle not [*Deny yourself. Be an ascetic.*];

<sup>22</sup> Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

He is talking about humanly-devised religions that include voluntary humility, fastings, washings—all the things that they have to do to try to *continually cleanse themselves* of sins...sins that were forgiven *a long time ago*. Now, the Sabbath, the new moon, and the holy days...these are commandments of *God*, not men. Therefore, the ordinances in question were not the laws of the Bible; they were the laws of men. And there were plenty of these—both in Judaism and in the pagan asceticism of Greece. These things, Paul said:

### Colossians 2–3

AKJV

<sup>23</sup> [...] have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body: not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh.

<sup>1</sup> If you then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, [...]

“And stop *worrying* about all this stuff down here.”

### Colossians 3

AKJV

- <sup>1</sup> If you then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God.
- <sup>2</sup> Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.
- <sup>3</sup> For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

Now, what does he mean by that? It's not that hard to follow, really. It's a reference back to his earlier reference on baptism—where we are *buried* with him in baptism, and we rise up to walk in newness of life. The wages of sin is death. And so, symbolically, we die and all of our sins are forgiven by Christ. And therefore you don't have to chase around *doing things* to get rid of your guilt. *Jesus* has done it for you.

### Colossians 3

AKJV

- <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with him in glory.
- <sup>5</sup> Mortify therefore your members which are on the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:

Well, wait a minute now. Why do you have to put *those* things away? Well, because the Law says you shouldn't do them. And it wasn't the Law that was nailed to the cross. If it had been, there's no particular reason to say this.

### Colossians 3

AKJV

- <sup>6</sup> For which things' [*all these sins*] sake the wrath of God comes on the children of disobedience:
- <sup>7</sup> In the which you also walked some time [*you lived that way*], when you lived in them.
- <sup>8</sup> But now you also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.

“You've gotten rid of all those, haven't you?”

### Colossians 3

AKJV

- <sup>9</sup> Lie not one to another, seeing that you have put off the old man with his deeds;
- <sup>10</sup> And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:
- <sup>11</sup> Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

And we don't have to chase some ethnic customs that we've learned in years gone by. There is, I think, an indirect reference here to some of the Greek doctrines of asceticism and some of the Jewish doctrines of legalism. He says, “None of that matters to us anymore.”



**Colossians 3**

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering;

<sup>13</sup> Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do you.

<sup>14</sup> And above all these things put on charity [*love*], which is the bond of perfection.

<sup>15</sup> And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also you are called in one body; and be you thankful.

<sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

And, folks, if you can manage to do that you will have come a *long* way.

**Colossians 3**

AKJV

<sup>18</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.

<sup>19</sup> Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.

This is a covenant, folks. It's a two-way street. Both have their responsibilities, and you can't claim the one when you're not doing the other.

**Colossians 3**

AKJV

<sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing to the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.

<sup>22</sup> Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service [*when they're looking*], as men pleasers; but [*when they're not looking, as well*] in singleness of heart, fearing God;

<sup>23</sup> And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not to men;

<sup>24</sup> Knowing that of the Lord you shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for you serve the Lord Christ.

<sup>25</sup> But he that does wrong shall receive for the wrong which he has done: and there is no respect of persons.

Chapter four, verse one:

**Colossians 4**

<sup>1</sup> Masters, give to your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

<sup>2</sup> Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;

<sup>3</sup> With praying also for us, that God would open to us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds [*in jail*]:

<sup>4</sup> That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

<sup>5</sup> Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. [*Use your time well, because it's going to get away from you.*]

<sup>6</sup> Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer every man.

And then he turns to the personal greetings:

**Colossians 4**

*AKJV*

<sup>7</sup> All my state shall Tychicus declare to you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord:

<sup>8</sup> Whom I have sent to you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts;

<sup>9</sup> With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known to you all things which are done here.

And so we read on, remembering that we're reading someone else's mail. And here are *real* people, *real* servants of God, *real* friends beloved of Paul.

Until next time. I'm Ronald Dart.

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