

Cancelled

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- [0 : 0 0] So we turn to Colossians chapter 2, and I've given the sermon tonight the title, Cancelled. It's funny how words change their meanings, isn't it? I'm sure you can think of a few examples of that. But Cancelled was once what you did with your magazine subscriptions, and of course it still is what happens with that.
- But now you may well have heard cancelled being a term used for what happens when somebody who is regarded as having unacceptable views is treated as no longer somebody to listen to, no longer somebody to be involved in various activities and so on.
- So I've used this word cancelled as the title of my talk because the word appears in the NIV translation in verses 13 to 15, which will be our particular focus.
- In verse 14, you read the words, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness. But we're actually going to see that there are two parallel statements in that little section from verse 13 to 15 about what Jesus accomplished on the cross.
- [1 : 3 1] And to a greater or lesser extent, we might use that notion of cancelled to reflect them. So I hope that that will be a little tag that will help you to see what's going on.
- But before we get to those verses in particular, I want to just think a little bit about the context of these verses, what has led up to this particular section of Paul's letter.
- We saw this morning that Paul is writing to a church that he didn't found, but which actually is a great encouragement to him in many ways. He is thankful that they are bearing fruit and growing.
- And he prays that that will continue to be the case. But the fact that he is greatly encouraged by what is happening in Colossae doesn't negate the fact that there are also dangers and threats to this congregation.
- And particularly, it seems, there is the danger that they might be misled in their beliefs by all kinds of people who would seek to teach them something else, who would seek to direct them in a different way.
- [2 : 4 6] And that is an experience that is not unique to the Christians in Colossae in the first century. We live in a world in which there are all kinds of competing ideologies, competing philosophies, competing claims on how we should understand the world.
- And we have no alternative but to consider whose voice we consider most convincing. For some people, we will hear God's voice in the scriptures and we will immediately say, well, that settles it.
- I believe this now. Some may find the battle is more demanding. And perhaps especially young people in a university setting or in a school setting may wonder, can I really trust what the Bible says?
- Can I rely on the Bible? What I want to do tonight is to see how Paul will speak words of great comfort and hope about what God has accomplished in Jesus on the cross in the context of a bigger picture, a bigger worldview issue.

That he is addressing. That he is addressing. That he is addressing. That he is addressing. So, in the passage that we read in chapter 2 of Colossians from verse 1, we're going to focus particular attention on verses 6 and following.

[4 : 16] In the first few verses of the chapter, Paul does speak about the dangers that face this congregation. And he encourages them.

He says that he is working hard for them. And he is saying these things because he is aware of the danger of being deceived.

He affirms that danger again in verse 8. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

But the core statement, perhaps we might say, is in verse 6, where he says, So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him.

Rooted and built up in him. Strengthened in the faith as you were taught. And overflowing with thankfulness. You'll see a lot of connections with what we saw in chapter 1 there.

[5 : 25] So, at the foundation of Paul's understanding is that he's writing to Christians who have received Christ Jesus as Lord. Of course, this is something that is a fundamental question for each one of us every time that we are confronted with the claims of Scripture.

Have we received individually Christ Jesus as Lord? Whatever interest we may have in Jesus. Whatever knowledge we may have of him.

Whatever interest in the facts surrounding his life and the context of his life. And all of these theological questions that have been considered through the ages. Ultimately, the question comes down to this.

Have we received Jesus Christ as Lord? Do we recognize him not simply as a religious figure? Not simply as a historical figure that is worthy of attention?

But as the risen Lord who demands our allegiance to him as the king over all of the earth. Paul is writing to people who have done that.

[6 : 32] And he is calling for them to continue on the path that they have already begun on. But he says, there are grave dangers.

You may well be presented with claims that challenge you. And what he says is that this matter of how we think, what we believe, is not just a matter of philosophy.

It's not just a matter of the various viewpoints that intellectuals might present as alternatives.

But it's a matter of spiritual conflict, of spiritual warfare. Paul understands the universe to be populated not only with the ultimate spiritual reality who is God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God.

And not only with the individual known as Satan, the direct opposition to God.

[7 : 40] Again, somebody who is, we might say, personal. Somebody who engages with determination and will to overthrow, if he only could, God's purposes for his people.

But he is, Paul understands this universe to be populated by various spiritual realities, which he uses various terms for.

And he uses a variety of terms, not always straightforward. But one of the phrases that we find is what the NIV translates as the elemental spiritual forces of this world in verse 8.

We also find him speak of every power and authority in verse 10. And that language comes back a little bit later on.

So this world is a world in which there are all kinds of challenges that face the believer. There are challenges to our thought.

[8 : 44] There are challenges in terms of spiritual realities, spiritual forces that would seek to undo God's purposes for his people. Now, of course, for some modern people, the notion that this world has spiritual realities in it is just nonsensical from the start.

So people who hold to a materialist position on how reality is made up will simply say, if you cannot measure it, if you cannot subject something to scientific scrutiny in a workshop, in a laboratory, then you cannot have any good grounds for its existence.

Paul takes a rather different position. He says there are all kinds of realities which are both visible and invisible. But over all of these, Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Lord, not just because of his authority, but because he actually is the one who brought them into being in their ultimate original form, at which time there was nothing evil about them.

You find that expressed classically and beautifully in chapter 1 and verses 15 and following. Let me just read to you a little bit of that.

[10 : 04] Chapter 1, verse 15. The sun is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities.

All things have been created through him and for him. So what Paul says there is that there is an ultimate authority in this universe who is Jesus Christ, the Lord, because he is the one in whom and by whom all things were created.

And that includes those spiritual realities which have since rebelled, since rejected Jesus' Lordship. But despite their rejection of Jesus' Lordship, they are still under his authority.

They cannot change that simply by their rejection of his authority. So that is the context in which Paul wants us to think about our situation as individuals.

Because he's going to talk to people who are now Christians and he's going to say, think about all of the things that threaten you, that are a threat to your Christian life.

[11 : 29] And he is going to say, there were two basic threats to your good and to your existence that were present in this world.

The first was your own sin, your own condition before God. The second was those powers that sought to bring you down, that sought disaster for you.

And both of these, Paul says, were huge threats, huge challenges to the well-being of you as individuals.

And these challenges were addressed completely and effectively by Jesus through the cross. So as we see this cosmic context for what happens in our lives, we're going to see that God has acted to cancel the effectiveness, to cancel the power, to cancel the threat of these things.

Now, he does this through Christ, who is, according to Paul, the place, the person in whom the fullness of the deity dwells in bodily form, verse 9 of chapter 2.

[12 : 58] And because Jesus is this remarkable person who is fully God and fully human, he is able to accomplish what no other person could.

And so Paul is saying, you're going to get all kinds of ideas presented to you. Here's a way of thinking about the world. Here's another way of thinking about the world. Here's a religious or a philosophical position that might be presented to you.

Do these positions deal effectively with these huge challenges that face you as individuals? And do they in any way compare with the astonishing news that God has chosen to deal with these realities fully and finally in the person of his son, Jesus, who is the one in whom the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form?

And the answer, of course, is no other philosophy, no other religious viewpoint, no other claim should be regarded as comparable with the message that Paul presents.

The message, which he has earlier said, is the gospel which bears fruit and grows the gospel, which is God's powerful message for the salvation, for the transformation of people everywhere.

[14 : 32] God has done some remarkable things through this person, Jesus Christ. He has brought what is described as fullness to people who believe in him.

Verse 10, just as Christ is the person in whom all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form, so in verse 10, in Christ, you, Christians, have been brought to fullness.

God offers to his people fullness of experience of Jesus, experience of knowing God, experience of being part of God's family.

God's purpose for you is fullness. It is not to diminish your life, but to give you life in all its fullness, as Jesus himself said.

And he can do that because, as the second part of verse 10 says, he is head over every power and authority, everything that would seek to diminish you, everything that would seek to rob you of God's purpose for you is under his headship.

[15 : 46] There is nothing that can stand as an equal against Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. Paul then goes on to give certain images of what it means for somebody to be not in relationship to God and then to be brought into relationship with God.

He's speaking here probably particularly to Gentiles, that is, non-Jewish people. Although we see that in Ephesians chapter 2, it's clear that both those who were Jewish and those who were non-Jewish have to be brought into fellowship with God by the same route, by the work of Jesus Christ.

But he talks about these people as being uncircumcised. That is, they were not marked by the physical sign of being the covenant people of God.

Now, Gentiles were not required in the early church to undergo that physical circumcision. That's what the council in Acts 15 decided.

That's what Galatians was really addressing in many respects. So, people were not expected to undergo that physical circumcision operation.

[17 : 06] But Paul says that people who were Gentiles were circumcised in their relationship to Christ in the sense that their faith in Jesus Christ marked them out as being now part of the covenant people of God.

So, it wasn't a physical operation, but their faith in Jesus placed them in the category of God's covenant people. Likewise, he uses the image of baptism, and he says, you were baptised into Christ.

Now, at that point, it's not primarily the question of water that is in mind here, just as it wasn't the question of physical circumcision that was in Paul's mind a moment or so earlier.

Rather, it is the idea that in baptism, in faith in Jesus Christ, someone is baptised, sharing with Christ's death and burial, and then sharing with his new life.

And so, that leads us to verse 13, where Paul says, You were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, really picking up those images from earlier in the passage.

[18 : 20] And he says, but God made you alive with Christ. So, this is the nature of the experience of the Christian. They were dead.

They were cut off from God's people in the past. But by God's grace, he has made them part of that covenant community. He has given them life because he is the source of life.

And in order for that to take place, we find this statement at the end of verse 13, he forgave us all our sins. And that leads us to the first of two issues that the cross addresses head on.

The first is that there is a threat of a charge, a charge against these people. And the second is that there are challengers.

There are opponents to these people. So, as Paul says he forgave us all our sins, he introduces this first issue, which is the charge that is against God's people.

[19 : 31] And he says the charge is cancelled. So, he forgave us all our sins. The fundamental problem that the Bible speaks of, that human beings have, is that broken relationship that has come about by human rebellion, by human rejection of God's word, of his command, of his fellowship.

And that rebellion, that rejection of God's gracious and kind rule has led to a great breach.

And that breach has led to people who are inclined by nature to turn from God rather than to turn to God. That is the position that every human being finds themselves in by nature.

And that's a huge problem because God is holy, he is perfect, he is pure, and he can have nothing to do with sin and with rebellion.

So, how can this huge problem be overcome? The answer is that God forgives our sins having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness.

[20 : 46] So, this issue of cancelling the charge is very striking language. It's a quite distinctive way of phrasing things. But the reality is that that charge was legitimate.

It was accurate. The charge that's spoken of here is language used to describe perhaps an IOU, a document that states that there is a debt.

And that document states a true thing. It states that for each one of us, there was a debt that we could not pay. That debt was what we had accrued because we acted in a way that broke God's good law, that rejected his lordship.

And that immediately put us in this position of having a debt. So, the document, the charge that said we were indebted against God, we had a debt we could not pay, that was an accurate document.

It wasn't that that was false. It wasn't a falsified document. Yes, we indeed did have a debt that we could not pay.

[21 : 59] But, Paul says, God has cancelled the debt. He has cancelled the charge. Now, how can he do that? How can he simply say the debt is cancelled?

You can imagine the IOU note and a stroke written through it. No longer is this debt owed. Well, the only valid way to do that is if the debt is paid.

And that is what happens in the cross. We're told that that debt, that note of indebtedness which stood against us, God has taken it away and nailed it to the cross.

So, in that striking, vivid image, what's seen is that the cross accomplished something absolutely astonishing with respect to our relationship to God.

That sin which stood as a huge barrier. That sin that stood as an offense to God. That breached the relationship. That sin has been dealt with.

[23 : 05] It's been cancelled, not by an act that doesn't take it seriously, but by Jesus going to the cross, giving his life as a sacrifice for sin, paying the price that needed to be paid, doing justice to bring about a circumstance in which God can look at us and say, you are forgiven.

What an astonishing thing that is. In this world of all sorts of philosophies and all sorts of ideas and ideologies, where can you find hope that your sin, your willful rejection of God's purposes, your deliberate turning away from God, and even your non-deliberate turning away from God, that which just comes almost naturally to you.

How can you deal with the fact that you have done things and said things and thought things that you are ashamed of? The reality that Paul presents us with is that God has dealt with that.

He has cancelled the debt. He has nailed it to the cross. And because Jesus went to the cross, because he was this person in whom all the fullness of the deity dwells, because he had all authority, he could give his life in such a way that that debt is cancelled.

Are you still bearing that guilt, bearing that note of debt on your shoulders? Are you still clinging to that note that says you are guilty?

[24 : 49] You owe this debt and you cannot pay it. There is no need to do that because Christ, the one in whom all the fullness of the deity dwells, has accomplished God's purpose for us by coming into this world, by bearing our sin and by cancelling that debt.

So that's the first challenge to Christians that was there. How could a person be part of God's glorious future when they had a debt standing against them?

The answer is God cancelled the debt through Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. But the other threat to people to becoming part of God's glorious future is these powers and authorities that we've heard of.

These threatening authorities that actually for a human being who is such a little creature in some respects is such a threat, such a danger.

The idea that there are those beings who are out to bring you down is a horrible idea. And, of course, modern materialism dismisses that sort of worldview and says there is no such thing as spiritual realities.

[26 : 15] But the Bible never presents things in those terms. It clearly presents the reality of spiritual forces, of spiritual beings. But it never suggests that this is a kind of balanced war where you're not quite sure what the outcome will be.

No, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the one who has brought all things into being and therefore has authority over all beings, even those who have rebelled against him.

And so we find that as a second aspect of what the cross has achieved in verse 15. So not only has he nailed the charge of our legal indebtedness to the cross, but he's done something else by the cross.

Verse 15 says, having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

So just as the written code is cancelled, we might say the powers and authorities are cancelled here in this passage. We find those powers and authorities as very real.

[27 : 25] And that is something that perhaps we have to challenge our own worldview. Many people throughout the world are much more realistic about the reality of spiritual forces than we typically are in Western Europe and in North America.

But in Africa and Asia and Latin America, there is a recognition of forces that go beyond humanity. Sometimes that recognition moves into unhealthy engagement with them.

Sometimes it leads to an unhealthy fear of them. But there is certainly a recognition of these realities.

That's something that perhaps we have to think about more seriously in the West. But what we mustn't do is imagine that they have any kind of authority over Jesus.

In the Gospels, we find many of these demonic forces challenging Jesus and Jesus demonstrates his authority over and over again. But perhaps during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, these forces thought that they had some kind of challenge to make.

[28 : 36] Perhaps they thought that if they came together in such and such a way, that they would bring this Jesus down. And perhaps they thought particularly that by the cross, everything had fallen apart for Jesus.

But little did they know that by the cross, Jesus would deal the final blow to their challenge of his authority.

And so we're told by Paul that he disarmed the powers and authorities, not by a military coup, but by an act of self-sacrifice. By the cross, he triumphs over these authorities, by these powers.

And what's more, he not only triumphs over them in the sense of being victorious, but Paul says he made a public spectacle of them. The language of triumph picks up the notion of a Roman triumph in which a conquering general would parade his defeated foes through a triumphal arch and to the place where they would be finally executed.

The image that Paul uses here is that these authorities, those powers that seek to oppose God's people have been defeated once for all.

[29 : 57] A decisive victory has been won in the moment of the cross. But that promises that there will be an ultimate point at which they will be done away with.

There will be no more threat from them at all. So, recapping, how does Paul speak about the way in which the cross has brought the cancellation of these threats?

This Jesus, this Jesus in whom they have come to believe, is not just one alternative among many valid ideas. He's not a philosopher that could be followed along with many others.

Rather, he is God incarnate who has dealt with the major challenges that these people have to becoming a part of God's future for them.

The challenge of the challenge of the challenge of the opponents that would seek to destroy them. And in the cross, Jesus has both dealt with the written code, dealing with the reality of indebtedness by his sacrifice on the cross.

[31 : 07] And so, the cross becomes the means of cancelling that code. But he also deals with that band of powers and authorities that would seek to bring us down because he disarms them by the cross.

And although they may still continue to seek to deceive and to damage, they cannot destroy God's people. And so, we find that that, again, was accomplished by the cross.

Just when these powers may have thought that they had got the victory, that they'd got the upper hand, they are disarmed and shamed. And so, we can have great confidence, despite what we were by nature, despite all of the competing claims that are around us.

If we are trusting in Jesus, if we recognise him as the risen Lord, then we can be confident that our sin is dealt with and that those that would seek our destruction and our devastation are dealt with.

And we can be confident that God will ultimately bring about his purposes.