

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **A Shadow of Things to Come (Colossians 2:16-17)**

Does Paul teach that God’s laws about the Sabbath, festivals, and foods have become irrelevant to believers in the Messiah? Many have said yes, citing Colossians 2:16-17 as proof. Let’s take a look at these two verses:

#### **Colossians 2:16-17**

*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.*

As we can see, Paul refers to things like the Sabbath and festivals as “shadows” that point forward to Christ. Based on these verses, some argue that now that Christ—the substance—has come, the shadows are no longer of any importance. Those commandments were set aside and nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14). Consequently, since these parts of the Torah are now irrelevant, we shouldn’t let anyone judge us for not observing them. Or so the argument goes.

Pastor John MacArthur’s comments are representative of the traditional interpretation of these verses:

Don’t let anybody hold you to a Sabbath. And that’s referring to the weekly Sabbath, because the other festival Sabbaths are covered under the term “festival and new moon.” Don’t let anybody hold you to the Sabbath. It was part of the system that included the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices. It’s gone. It was only the shadow, not the substance [...] Paul is saying, you no longer need the shadow, you have the substance.

-John MacArthur, “Understanding the Sabbath.” *Grace to You*. [www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org)

Is that really what Paul is saying in Colossians? Does he declare commands like the Sabbath and festivals to be irrelevant now that Messiah has come? That seems unlikely for a couple of reasons.

First, such an interpretation doesn’t fit with the broader biblical witness of Paul’s perspective on these commandments. For instance, throughout the New Testament, we see that Paul regularly attended and

participated in the synagogue services on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:3). Luke records that Paul's "custom" was to worship on the Sabbath (Acts 17:2). Moreover, in Acts 20:26, we see Paul expressing a desire to be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Shavuot or Pentecost. In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul instructs his readers on how they are to observe Passover. Based on Paul's behavior and teaching elsewhere in Scripture, it's difficult to imagine him thinking that these parts of the Torah became irrelevant in light of the Messiah's coming. Instead, these examples of Paul observing and teaching these commandments are what we would expect if he believed they were still important.

Second, the false teaching Paul addresses in Colossians is characterized as "[according to human tradition](#)" (Colossians 2:8). It is "[according to human precepts and teachings](#)" (Colossians 2:22). That description does not seem to apply to the Sabbath, festivals, and dietary laws. Those things were not human teachings; they were commanded by God.

Moreover, this false teaching is characterized further as being "[not according to Christ](#)" (Colossians 2:8). But we know that Christ affirmed every iota and dot of the Torah as having enduring authority in the lives of his followers (Matthew 5:18). He said his followers are to do and teach even the least of the Torah's commandments (Matthew 5:19).

When we consider Paul's record of observing the biblical Sabbath and festivals, along with the fact that in Colossians 2 he is coming against what he calls "human teachings," it seems strange that he would discourage Sabbath, festival, and dietary law observance in Colossians 2:16-17. But, aside from simply doubting the traditional interpretation of these verses, do we have any good reasons for accepting an alternative interpretation?

To understand Paul's admonition here, it might help us to gain a fuller understanding of what scholars call "the Colossian heresy." What was this heresy that Paul counters in his letter?

## The Colossian Heresy

Paul warned the Colossian believers about a false doctrine that certain people were teaching. We are given a description of this false doctrine in Colossians 2:8.

### Colossians 2:8

[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.](#)

The false doctrine influencing believers at Colossae is characterized first as "philosophy and empty deceit." The Greek term translated "philosophy," *philosophia*, generally carries the sense of "manner of life" and often addresses ethics. For instance, Josephus describes the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees as different "sects of philosophy" (*Antiq.* 18.11).

In the Hellenistic Jewish literature, the word takes on what the scholar Nijay Gupta calls "a moralistic edge." He writes:

A number of texts presume that a good and true philosophy has the ability to restrain sin and control wanton passions and desires.

-Nijay K. Gupta, *Colossians* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2013), p. 90

Gupta cites three historical sources that demonstrate this idea. For instance, in 4 Maccabees, written in the first or second century AD, Antiochus pressures the Jews to eat unclean foods. Eleazar defends the dietary laws of the Torah, as well as Judaism more broadly, calling it “our philosophy”:

You scoff at our **philosophy** as though living by it were irrational, but it teaches us self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we endure any suffering willingly.

-4 Maccabees 5:22-23, RSV

According to the *Letter of Aristeas*, written in the third or second century BC, Ptolemy asks the question, “What is philosophy?” to which a Jewish sage responds:

To deliberate well in reference to any question that emerges...and never to be carried away by impulses, but to ponder over the injuries that result from the passions, and to act rightly as the circumstances demand, practicing moderation.

-Letter of Aristeas. Quoted in Nijay K. Gupta, *Colossians* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2013), pp. 90-91

Philo, a first-century Jewish philosopher, also has some relevant remarks:

Philosophy teaches temperance with regard to the belly, and temperance with regard to the parts below the belly, and also temperance and restraint of the tongue.

-Philo, *Congr.* 80. Quoted in Nijay K. Gupta, *Colossians* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2013), p. 91

These historical sources give us an idea of what Paul means by the word philosophy. Broadly, it’s a manner of life intended to develop self-control. The doctrine influencing the Colossian believers could be considered a type of philosophy, but according to Paul it is “empty deceit.” It doesn’t actually deliver what it promises. Paul says it is “of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Colossians 2:23).

Another problem with this false teaching is that it is “according to human tradition.” From Paul’s perspective, mere human teachings are useless in overcoming the power of sin (Colossians 2:22-23).

Finally, this false teaching is according to “the elemental spirits of the world,” which likely refers to spiritual beings that were believed to have control over nature and the cosmos. Philo writes about nations that made divinities out of the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire (*Decalogue* 53). The *Wisdom of Solomon*, a book written in the first century BC, speaks similarly about ignorant people who believe that the elements, such as wind, fire, water, and so forth, were gods who ruled the world (*Wisdom of Solomon* 13:1-2). Passages from the pseudepigrapha (1 Enoch 43:1-4; 75:1; 80:6-8; Jubilees 2:2) and Dead Sea Scrolls (1QM 10.11-12) give some additional evidence of these types of ideas floating around the Judaisms of the Second Temple era.

It appears that the false teachers at Colossae were enamored with cosmic authorities, supernatural powers over nature, and angels (Colossians 2:8, 15, 18, 20). They exalted and feared these spiritual entities, believing them to have control over the universe and their destinies. These superstitions were also combined with religious practices, including biblical holy days. In practice, this false philosophy

strictly regulated foods, drinks, and festivals (2:16) and involved ascetic rituals and worship of angels (2:18-23). By adhering to the practices and regulations of these false teachers, people believed they could attain wisdom and be protected from the evil spirits that troubled them.

Hippolytus of Rome, a late second/early third century Christian theologian, wrote about the heretical teaching of a man named Elchasai (*A Refutation of All Heresies* 9.11). Elchasai's teaching gives us a fitting parallel to what we see happening at Colossae, where some teachers mixed elements of Judaism with astrological beliefs and practices. Citing Hippolytus, the scholar Clinton Arnold writes this:

There is one figure who may help us better understand how a Christian teacher may have combined magical, astrological, Jewish, and local pagan cult traditions into a new teaching. At the end of the first century, during the time of Trajan (A.D. 98-117), a Christian leader named Elchasai combined aspects of Jewish nomism (circumcision and law observance) with astrological beliefs and practices. The resultant syncretistic teaching emphasized the hostility of the stars (viewed as angels) and the need to regulate one's life according to the calendar (especially the Sabbath and the courses of the moon) [...] Colossae was certainly not afflicted by the teaching of Elchasai, but "the philosophy" bore many similarities. At the minimum, the example of Elchasai points to emerging forms of localized syncretistic Christianity at an early stage. The Elchasaite teaching also demonstrates how a magical/astrological interpretation of sabbaths could surface in early Christianity.

-Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 217-218

In summary, the false teaching at Colossae was a type of "philosophy"—a manner of life intended to develop self-control. But according to Paul, it failed to deliver what it promised because it was according to mere human tradition and it wrongly exalted elemental spirits and powers. It incorporated the observance of some biblical practices mixed with ascetic rituals.

A big problem with this mystical false teaching is that it ultimately resulted in minimizing the Messiah's exalted position as the head from whom the body derives its life (Colossians 2:18-19). These false teachers worshiped angels and tried to appease the elemental spirits instead of looking to the Messiah.

So, how does Paul counter this false teaching? He proclaims the preeminence of the Messiah:

- Paul teaches that the Messiah is the real embodiment of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:2-3).
- Messiah is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). That is, God's full character is embodied in Messiah (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4; Philippians 2:6; Hebrews 1:3).
- Messiah is "the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), which is an Old Testament title expressing royal status and authority (Psalm 89:27).
- It was by, through, and for Messiah that "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" (Colossians 1:16). Importantly, the invisible creations in heaven would include angelic beings. Paul's point is that Messiah, the one by whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created, has authority and power over all created things in heaven and on earth.
- Messiah is "before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). That is, Messiah has priority in terms of time and rank, and he is the sustainer of the universe (cf. Hebrews 1:3). Paul hopes to encourage the Colossian believers not to try to find coherence in the

universe by turning to angels. Messiah is the one who holds all things together.

- Messiah is also “[the head of the body, the church](#)” (Colossians 1:18; 2:10, 18-19). That is, he is the lord over the church as well as its source of life: “...[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 2:19).
- Messiah is “[the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent](#)” (Colossians 1:18). The Messiah’s resurrection has inaugurated the kingdom—his resurrection being the “[firstfruits](#),” assuring us of the full harvest to come at the end of the age (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). In the meantime, the Messiah exercises his rule through his body, the church.
- The Messiah is one in whom “[all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell](#)” (Colossians 1:19; 2:9). As F.F. Bruce puts it, “all the attributes of God—his spirit, word, wisdom, and glory—are disclosed in him” (*Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984], p. 74).

Paul made this proclamation to set the record straight about who was really in charge. He wanted to warn the Colossian believers not to be led astray by mystical teachings involving things like angel worship. His concern was that these false teachings relegated the Messiah, who is head over all rule and authority in creation, to the theological background. Thus, Paul encouraged the Colossian believers to look to the Messiah alone to satisfy their yearning for spiritual fulfillment (Colossians 2:10). This is why he goes to some length to express the supremacy of the Messiah.

Paul makes one more significant point in his argument for the Messiah’s preeminence. He proclaims that only the Messiah’s work on the cross provides forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God (Colossians 1:20; 2:11-14). Redemption cannot be found anywhere else, least of all through a strict observance of ascetic rituals to appease angelic powers. The Messiah’s work also had the effect of defeating the spiritual rulers and authorities (Colossians 2:15).

To demonstrate his point about redemption and reconciliation, Paul uses the metaphors of circumcision, baptism, and the “record of debt” (Colossians 2:11-14). Paul’s circumcision metaphor here expresses our dying in Messiah’s death—that is, “putting off the body of the flesh.” Paul then moves to baptism to express our being buried and rising in union with Messiah in his burial and resurrection. When we put our faith in the Messiah, we die with him, enter his tomb with him, and are raised with him.

The third metaphor Paul uses—the record of debt—has caused some confusion. Some have supposed Paul teaches that Messiah took away the Torah and nailed it to the cross. Let’s look at the passage:

#### **Colossians 2:13-14**

[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.](#)

The interpretation that Messiah set aside the Torah is unlikely. First, the Greek word that the New Testament always uses to refer to the Torah (*nomos*) is nowhere to be found in this passage. Second, the idea that Messiah took away the Torah doesn’t fit with Paul’s argument. How would getting rid of the Torah assure forgiveness of sins? That simply doesn’t follow.

A better interpretation is that the “record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands” refers to the record of our sins and the punishment required for them. God’s Torah legally demands death as

payment from those who break it. However, the Messiah has canceled our record of sins that stood against us. The Messiah did not cancel the law, but rather the written record of our transgressions of the law, because he provided forgiveness for the sins that we had committed.

By canceling the record of our sins, the Messiah “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them” (Colossians 2:15). That is, he has removed any power these spiritual forces might have had over us. Therefore, we need not seek out the wisdom or protection from any inferior spiritual entities. The Messiah has already provided everything we need.

Now that we have a better understanding of the false teaching in Colossians, and Paul’s answer to it, let’s turn again to Paul’s admonition concerning certain Torah commandments:

### **Colossians 2:16-17**

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.

Once again, this passage is traditionally interpreted to mean that the Sabbath, festivals, and so forth are now irrelevant in light of the Messiah. Therefore, the Colossian believers should not be judged for not observing them. But based on what we’ve learned about the false teachings Paul is dealing with, it seems clear that there is more going on here.

Paul does not state that *the commandments* are invalid; he states that *the judgment of these false teachers* is invalid. A better understanding, which is consistent with the context, is that the Colossian believers are not to accept judgment from these false teachers regarding *how* to observe these commandments.

The false teachers at Colossae applied esoteric meanings and ascetic rituals to these Torah commandments (Colossians 2:21-22) and judged those who didn’t follow their teachings as unenlightened (Colossians 2:16). Paul says not to accept their judgment. Their form of “Torah observance” is really no Torah observance at all. It’s a false religion mixed with a distorted misuse of the Torah.

The scholar Douglas Moo likewise has recognized that these aspects of the Torah have been connected to a broader religious philosophy in Colossians:

On the whole, then, it seems best to view the practices in v. 16 as basically Jewish in origin and perhaps even orientation **while still recognizing that they have been taken up into a larger mix of religious ideas and practices.**

-Douglas Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 221

In other words, proper observance of these Torah commands was not the problem in Colossians. The problem was that false teachers had mixed things like the Sabbath and festivals with their mystical teachings.

Paul’s admonition to the Colossian believers, then, is not to accept judgment on these matters from these false teachers. These false teachers misuse and distort the biblical commandments in their worship of various cosmic powers over which the Messiah has triumphed (Colossians 2:15). Again, the problem is

the perversion of these Torah commands within a false religious philosophy, not the commands themselves.

As the scholar Peter O'Brien puts it:

For Israel the keeping of these holy days was evidence of obedience to God's law and a sign of her election among the nations. At Colossae, however, the sacred days were to be kept for the sake of the "elemental spirits of the universe," those astral powers who directed the course of the stars and relegated the order of the calendar. **So Paul is not condemning the use of sacred days or seasons as such; it is the wrong motive involved when the observance of these days is bound up with the recognition of the elemental spirits.**

-Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 139

This added context perhaps could bring some clarity to what Paul means in verse 17. Let's read it again:

### **Colossians 2:17**

*These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*

Here, Paul says that things like the Sabbath and festivals serve as shadows pointing toward "the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." That is, these aspects of the Torah ultimately are intended to reveal the work of Messiah. Notice that Paul says these Torah commandments are a shadow of "things to come," not just things that have already happened. These commands function not only in memorializing Yeshua's work of atonement on the cross but also continue to point forward to his future work to occur at the end of the age.

Paul's point is that the Sabbath, festivals, and so forth, were intended to point beyond themselves to the Messiah, who is the substance. They were not meant to be the end in themselves, and they definitely were not meant to be used in angel worship.

As we've seen, like other difficult passages in which it appears on the surface that Paul diminishes the value of the Torah, a closer look at Colossians 2:16-17 reveals that he spoke against only a misuse of the Torah, not the Torah itself.

In conclusion, a contextual understanding of these verses implies that Paul does not regard things like the Sabbath and festivals as unimportant. He condemns only an improper observance of these laws in connection with mystical false teachings that downplay Messiah and his work. Once again, the problem was with human precepts and teachings, not God's commandments themselves (Colossians 2:8, 22). But when we observe these parts of the Torah appropriately, with a focus on the Messiah and his work of redemption, there's no problem. In fact, recognizing the substance that these "shadows" point to ought to make us value them that much more!

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.*

*Remember, continue to test everything.*

*Shalom!*

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**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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