

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Lecture 22, Philippians

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, lecture 22 on Philippians and Colossians.

All right, let's go ahead and get started. And let's open with a prayer.

Father, thank you for such a beautiful day outside. And because of that, I pray that we'll be able to focus our attention on the portions of the New Testament that we will be thinking about and covering. And Father, I pray that, as always, we would become more aware of and more familiar with the original context in which the New Testament books were written. But as a result of that, we would be better equipped to understand how they continue to speak to us today as your very word and revelation to us. In Jesus' name, we pray, amen.

Are you all waiting for a quiz? I would never do that on a week that you've had a final exam, at least not yet anyway.

So, let's open another piece of the early church's mail, and we'll open a letter written to the church at Philippi, a book that we call The Letter to the Philippians. The first thing to ask is, so what do we know about the city of Philippi that might help us to orient ourselves a little bit to the context in which the letter of the Philippians is written? First of all, the city of Philippi was a town that was in, what today would be the northern part of Greece, then a country known as Macedonia. Actually, the city of Philippi was named after the father of Alexander the Great, Philip.

You remember Alexander the Great, the mighty general who basically Hellenized the whole world and spread Greek culture and language throughout the inhabited world, whose kingdom extended larger than any other kingdom basically until Rome came along. But it's after his father Philip that the city of Philippi was named. But the city of Philippi was known for something else in the first century.

It was basically what was called a Roman colony. That meant that Philippi was the home of veterans from the Roman army, and they would come to Philippi to settle. And the reason they do so is because there they could be free of taxation.

They had kind of a tax-exempt status living in Philippi. And it's to that city, it's to that city that Paul addresses the letter to the Philippians, to a church or churches that had settled there. And Philippians is one of those books that we're going to cruise over rather quickly and move through rather quickly.

We spent a little bit of time on books like 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, but we'll sail over, sail through Philippians quite quickly. But I want to jump right into asking, why did Paul write this letter? Why a letter to the Philippian church? There seem to be a number of things going on in Philippi. First of all, Paul seems to write to explain his circumstances in prison.

Remember, Philippians is one of those books that we have designated as, or that students of the New Testament designate as the prison epistles. That is because Paul is, obviously when you read this letter, Paul makes clear reference to his imprisonment during the time of his writing. Although, probably at this point, it's more accurate to describe Paul as under house arrest.

We often envision, when we think of Paul's imprisonment, we think of him chained to a soldier, perhaps, or in some dark dungeon writing this letter by candlelight or whatever. But most likely, Paul has a lot more freedom, and you certainly kind of get that impression when you read Philippians. In fact, Paul's pretty confident in Philippians that he will be released from prison and from his house arrest.

But Paul writes this letter from prison, and one of the purposes is he seems to write to explain his circumstances in prison. To explain that despite his circumstances, and perhaps despite some of the expectations of the Philippians, Paul's circumstances in prison have not turned out to the detriment of the gospel, or does not mean the defeat of the gospel, or does not mean the victory of the Roman Empire. But instead, Paul makes clear that his circumstances in prison have actually turned out for the advance of the gospel in the Roman Empire for Jesus Christ.

So again, perhaps some of his readers wanted to know if his imprisonment meant that something serious had happened, or this would happen to the detriment of the gospel, or what the implications were for their own faith in Jesus Christ. And so, Paul writes to assure them that, again, his situation in prison does not mean that the gospel has not continued to advance, or does not mean that Jesus Christ is not Lord. So, he seems to write to explain why it is he's in prison, or to explain his circumstances.

A second reason is clearly Paul writes to thank the Philippians for their financial support. Now it's interesting to compare this letter with the letter of 1 Corinthians. Remember, in 1 Corinthians, when Paul went to the city of Corinth, he refused their financial support.

Probably the reason he did that was wrapped up with the situation of the Corinthians and the way they were treated there. So, Paul did not want his relationship with the Corinthians to be confused as a patron-client type relationship or a relationship where you have sophists and others competing for the attention and following of

different disciples. It is perhaps to avoid those kinds of notions, Paul refused any financial support at Corinth. Instead, he worked on his own.

He set up his own shop and made his own living. Yet with the Philippian church, it appears to be just something very different. So, in Philippi, Paul was happy to receive their financial support as a way so that he could devote himself to full-time ministry.

So, it seemed to depend on the circumstances whether Paul accepted the financial support of the people he ministered to or not. And from the Philippians, he did receive his financial support, and he wants now to thank them for that and even to encourage them to continue that in his ministry. Third, and the last purpose is, Paul does seem to, although his response to the church at Philippi is largely positive, he does seem to need to address a couple of problems in the church.

One of those problems is disunity. And to me, at least, as I read the letter, it's not clear exactly why there are some disputes or quarrels within the church, and I'm not sure exactly why that's the case. But when you read the letter, especially in chapter 2 and in chapter 4, towards the end of the letter, it's clear that there are arguments or disputes, and the church is in danger of being disunited, so Paul writes to try to calm this disunity or calm these quarrels and to keep the church united.

You can see when you compare this with a book like 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, you can see one of the biggest things that had Paul so upset is when the church was in danger of being divided. And more than anything, Paul wants to preserve the unity of the church. And when it was in danger of division or strife or conflict, that's one of the things that really got Paul ticked off when he wrote to the church.

So, disunity, the fact that for some reason there were some in the Philippian church that were quarreling, and there was dissension, and perhaps the church is in danger of division. The other one, in Philippians chapter 3, Paul is once again confronting a situation very similar to the one he did in Galatians, and that is the group of individuals that we call Judaizers who have infiltrated the church. Some have even suggested that there was a group that kind of dogged Paul, and at almost every turn in his ministry, they almost followed him around and tried to undercut his ministry and promote teaching that said faith in Jesus Christ was not enough.

It said one must submit to the law of Moses. One must identify as a Jew in order to belong to the true people of God. So, you can see where, in a sense, Paul's gospel that he's going to preach, is that Gentiles can become God's people solely based on faith in Jesus Christ, and they don't need to submit to the Mosaic law.

You can see where that gets him into problems, where those who were zealous for Judaism and those who were zealous for the law of Moses as a defining factor that you were God's people, those are the persons that seem to cause the most problems

for Paul. And so, we see these Judaizers crop up again in Philippians chapter 3, and you read chapter 3 and it sounds again like Paul's addressing much the same problem that he did back in the book of Galatians. So those three, those are at least three of the main purposes that I think lie behind the writing of Philippians to Paul explains his circumstances in prison, that his imprisonment does not mean weakness, it does not conflict with the power of the gospel, it does not, has not hindered the spread of the gospel.

He writes to thank the Philippians for their financial support and to encourage them to continue that, and then he does write to deal with a couple of problems in the church, that it being disunity for some reason, quarreling and fighting, and then the problem of Judaizers once again slipping in and undermining Paul's ministry and the gospel that he preaches, that Gentiles can become God's people solely by faith in Jesus Christ, apart from the Mosaic law. Now one question that gets raised, usually with any book, and I don't know how much of it is just our desire to have things in a nice neat package, so we have a very quick kind of soundbite or quick reference to summarize an entire book, but usually when we look at New Testament books, we're prone to ask, what is the dominant theme? Is there a primary theme that unifies the entire book? And that's been asked of Philippians numerous times. The problem is, Philippians seem to yield different answers.

So, for example, some have suggested that joy is the theme, the main theme of Philippians, and I can think off the top of my head of a number of books, particularly popular books, that are entitled to something to do with joy in relationship to Philippians. So, some have suggested joy is the main theme. Others have suggested suffering is the main theme of Philippians.

Some have combined them and said joy and suffering are the main themes. Others have suggested sharing or participation in the gospel is the main theme because you do find Paul, especially at the beginning and end of his letters, as I said, encouraging the Corinthians to continue to participate in the gospel through their financial support of Paul. So, some have said participation in the gospel is the dominant theme.

Another possible theme could be correct thinking. Although I haven't seen this proposed, this is a proposal that I certainly think is possible. When you read throughout the book, notice how many times Paul tells the readers to have this mind in them, or to think this way, or to think the same thing.

He says that over and over again. So, you could argue, based on the number of references to words of thinking, and thinking correctly and thinking the same thing, that thinking the correct thing could be a dominant theme or the dominant theme of Philippians. Unity is another theme that some have suggested is the main theme of Philippians.

So, again, the problem is that Philippians itself seems to yield a variety of answers to that question, what is the dominant theme? So, my suggestion is that Philippians does not have a main theme, Paul is writing, is trying to communicate a number of themes. I mean you think about it, this isn't a precise analogy, but you think about it when you sit down to write a letter. Sometimes you write a letter for very specific purposes, such as to secure a job or to address a problem, such as a product if you're writing to a company.

But at other times, however, you may write a letter just to kind of ramble. Especially if you're writing an informative letter, you might jump around to different topics. You're just kind of divulging information or dealing with a number of topics that may not have one overarching unifying theme.

And in my opinion, Philippians is that way. So, attempts to isolate the theme of Philippians as unity or joy or suffering or whatever, I think they all fall short, and all of those are themes. And they're all legitimately found in Philippians, but that's because I think Paul is simply kind of addressing a number of issues, and simply kind of wandering around touching on a number of themes and topics that he wants to address to the Philippian church.

All right, I said I want to move through Philippians rather quickly, but there is one text I want to slow down and look at in just a little bit of detail, and it's found in the second chapter of Philippians. In fact, usually, this is the text in Philippians, this is the text that gets all the attention for the most part. It starts in verse 6 of chapter 2, actually back up to verse 5, where Paul says, let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.

But he emptied himself, or I actually like, I think the NIV is the most accurate here, he made himself nothing, or he made himself of no reputation, by taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in the human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him, that is Jesus, gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Now there's two ways that we could approach this, and by the way, this section is one of the sections in the New Testament that is labeled a Christological hymn, the other one is found in Colossians that we'll deal with later on, hopefully we'll get to Colossians today, but in the book of Colossians we find another section that is known as a hymn, a Christological hymn, and part of the debate is, if your Bibles, if you have a Bible that kind of sets poetic sections or hymnic sections apart in kind of verse form, your Bible probably does that to Philippians 2, 6 through 11, that is because this section is widely regarded as a

hymn, or at least some kind of exalted prose or poetic type of language, and there's debate, did Paul write this, or is Paul simply using and quoting from a first century hymn or poem that his readers are familiar with and now he's using it, much like we would quote somebody at length and put quotation marks around it, but I'm not interested in trying to determine, did Paul write this or is he borrowing the hymn, no matter what the case, we still have to deal with what it's doing in its context and what it says.

The first thing is, to notice the structure of this hymn, the structure of this hymn actually takes a U-shape, it begins with Jesus Christ referred to as in the form of God, actually a reference to Jesus' preexistence with God, but then the hymn begins a downturn at the bottom of the U, where he takes on human form, he's made in the likeness of a human being, but it goes even further, he humbles himself even to the point of death and death on a cross, but then, so you've reached the bottom of the U-shape, but then the hymn takes an upward turn, so that now at the very last few verses, Jesus Christ is exalted far above, in the heavenly realms, he's exalted and given a name that is above every name so that everyone would bow at that name of Jesus. So, the hymn kind of looks like this, the so-called Christ hymn in Philippians chapter 2, Jesus Christ, heavenly status, says although he was in the form of God, he did not consider that equality with God as something to be exploited for his own use, but he surrendered that to the point of becoming a human being and humiliating himself to the point of death on a cross, but that wasn't the end of it, the plot takes a turn upwards to Jesus' exaltation. Actually, if this were accurate, it sort of is.

This should be higher than this, in a sense. I'm convinced that in this hymn, Jesus doesn't just get restored to the same position he had before, but he receives something he did not have before. Now, as the one who was humiliated, now he is exalted and he receives a name at which every knee will bow and confess that he is Lord.

So, Jesus' exaltation, I think, results in a status that he doesn't even have before. Now, a couple of things about this hymn. First of all, the Christology of it.

This hymn has what is called a very high Christology, which is a clear reference to Jesus' heavenly pre-existence, the fact that he exists in the very form of God. But, I also want to draw your attention to an interesting Old Testament quotation in this section. And if you, you don't need to turn there, I will, but if you were to go back to Isaiah chapter 45 in the Old Testament, Isaiah chapter 45 and verse 23, I think is the one I want, Isaiah chapter 45 verse 23.

Now, this is God speaking to Israel through Isaiah the prophet. So, this is God referring to himself. I'm going to back up and read verse 22.

He says, Turn to me, God says to Israel, turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other. That's interesting. God is asserting his absolute uniqueness that there is no other God besides him.

Then he says, by myself, again, these are God's words to Israel, by myself I have sworn from my mouth has gone forth righteousness, a word that shall not return to me, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess. Interestingly, that is the very verse now that gets applied to Jesus in Philippians chapter 2. So that we see, we see the kind of the, not the beginning of, but we see a phenomenon that will occur numerous times in the New Testament. That is texts that in the Old Testament referred to God now get applied to Jesus Christ.

And what is interesting about this one is in Isaiah chapter 45, it's in the context of the absolute uniqueness of God. He says, I am God and there is no other. So how can this text get applied to Jesus Christ, a text in the Old Testament that affirms the absolute uniqueness of God, that there is no other God?

How can that text get applied to Jesus Christ if he is not in some sense, God himself? So that's why I say this, this hymn or poem has a very high Christology. Jesus is in the very form of God. He pre-exists as God.

In the end, he is exalted and a text that applies or refers to the uniqueness of God over against all other gods now gets applied to Jesus Christ as the one who will receive universal worship, the universal worship of all creation. Now, despite this high Christology and emphasis on Jesus' lordship and his absolute uniqueness as God, but the one who humbles himself and takes on human form, it's important though to back up and ask, so what's the purpose of this hymn? Is Paul teaching us a Christology lesson about who Jesus is and his nature? Well, there's certainly some truth in that, but it's important to examine how this text functions in its context. The most important text in Philippians 2 is not verses 6-11.

The most important text is verses 1-4 of chapter 2, where Paul says, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete. This is Paul addressing the Philippians by being of the same mind. There's that thinking language, being of the same mind, being in full accord and of one mind, having the same love, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interest but to the interest of others. And then comes our text, have this mind in you which is also in Jesus Christ. So primarily, this hymn or poem with this very exalted Christology is primarily functioning as a model for the kind of behavior that Paul wants to see in his readers in chapter 2:1-4.

It's an example of the lack of selfish ambition. It's an example of the kind of sacrificial love and concern for others that Paul wants to see in his readers in verses 1-4. Now he gives an example of that from Jesus himself in verses 5-11.

So, it's important to understand that this text is not just there to satisfy your curiosity about who Jesus is, although that's important, it's meant as an ethical model for what it means to live out this self-sacrificing love, and this lack of selfish ambition that Paul wants to see in his readers from chapter 2:1-4.

All right, any questions on Philippians? Like I said, that's the only text I want to slow down and look at. The main thing I want you to focus on is the overall purpose of the letter.

Why did Paul write it? What's he trying to accomplish? Then the kind of poetic and hymnic structure did not rhyme. Our poetry today often rhymes in sound, or even our hymns that we sing in church or our praise songs and choruses, they tend to rhyme ends of lines, rhyme with each other. That's not the case necessarily here.

There are other factors that suggest that it's a hymn or kind of an exalted prose type of writing. That's a good question. Hopefully, you can begin to see that the New Testament, our understanding of theology and who God is and who Jesus is, etc., etc., come from writings that were produced in very specific historical circumstances.

Again, Paul is addressing real churches with real problems, and the trick kind of is to understand how we understand the theology from letters that were addressed to very, very specific situations and circumstances. So, let's open another piece of the early church's mail. Again, following the canonical order in the New Testament, not the chronological order in which they were written, the next book we want to look at is a book written to the city of Colossae, a book that you know from your New Testament as the letter to the Colossians.

This is a kind of slightly blurry map of southwestern Asia Minor or modern southwestern Turkey. Here's the city of Ephesus we've talked a little bit about, although again, I don't think the letter to the Ephesians was written to Ephesus. It probably was written to a lot of these cities, but you'll notice inland from Ephesus, inland ways, is the city of Colossae.

And Colossae, actually a couple of other pictures, this is the tell, the mound of the city. This is a modern picture of the ancient, where the ancient city of Colossae would have been. This is the amphitheater, what's left of the amphitheater in the city of Colossae, obviously from modern-day depiction of Colossae.

What do we know about the city of Colossae? A couple of interesting things is, first of all, the city of Colossae was one of the smallest and probably the least significant city

to which Paul wrote a letter. Unlike cities like Ephesus or Rome which played important roles politically and economically, or Corinth, Colossae appeared to be a rather insignificant city. It appears to have been destroyed too by an earthquake sometime in the middle of about 60 AD.

So, a rather insignificant city. However, the other thing we know about the letter is that Paul apparently did not visit the city itself. This is one of the few cities that Paul writes a letter to that he himself did not plant the church, or play a role in that, or had not visited personally.

And there are several verses scattered throughout Colossians that give you that impression. For example, I think in chapter 2 and verse 1, he says, here's what Paul says in chapter 2 and verse 1 of Colossians, for I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. So, he seems to categorize the Colossian Christians that he's writing to as part of this group of those he has never seen face to face.

Instead, someone else has planted the church in Colossae, but now something has happened that Paul sees it necessary that he write a letter to the church in this city. One thing that's very interesting with Colossians, in the next part of your notes, is that in several places it overlaps closely with Ephesians, to the extent that the vocabulary and the similarity are the same kind of similarity you find in the synoptic problem. Remember when we talked about Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and we said that the wording, not just the order of events and the concepts, but the wording was so similar that there must have been some relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

And we suggested Mark was probably written first, and then Matthew and Luke utilized Mark, but also some other sources. That same kind of similarity is evident between these passages that I have listed in your syllabus between Ephesians and Colossians. I'm not going to take time to read them, but if you have some time, even in an English translation, just compare them, you can't help but note the similarities down to the exact words that are used.

So how do we explain this? Perhaps, most likely, a possible scenario is that Paul might have written Colossians first to address a very specific situation or problem, and we'll see what that problem is in just a moment. And then, basically, Paul thought that what he wrote would be beneficial for a much broader audience. So, he writes and includes much of the information from Colossians he now addresses to a much wider readership, not in response to any specific problem.

So that probably accounts for the similarities. Some suggest that Paul didn't write one of these letters. Perhaps he wrote Colossians, and some later authors copied parts of Colossians to produce Ephesians.

But I think it's more likely that Paul simply used the same material twice. Once to address a very specific situation in Colossians, which we'll see what that is, and then again to address a much more general situation and general audience. Now the question is, what problem might Paul have been addressing? Or another way to put it, was there some kind of false teaching or some kind of a problem in the city of Colossae that caused Paul to write? This has been debated because Paul doesn't come out and actually say this.

When you read Galatians, remember we talked about Galatians. If you go back and read that book, it's very, very evident and clear that Paul's addressing some kind of false teaching or problem. However, when you read Colossians, it doesn't come across quite as strongly.

In fact, the only evidence that you have that Paul may be addressing some kind of problem or false teaching does not come until chapter 2, about a third of the letter. Whereas in Galatians, Paul jumped right into the problem, saying, I am astonished that you have so quickly turned from the gospel. But in Colossians, you don't get any hint that there's anything wrong in the church at Colossae until you get about a third of the way through the book until you get well into chapter 2. So, because of that, some have said, well, Paul doesn't seem to be addressing any situation or a specific problem or some kind of false teaching that has infiltrated the church as he was in Galatia.

So, some have said, no, he's not. But others, others are convinced because of verses like this. This is chapter 2 and verse 4. I'm not sure why I have two verse 4's up there, but in chapter 2, the second one should be verse 8. But in chapter 2 and verse 4, he says, I am trying, and again, this is the first hint that you get that there's any problem.

Paul finally says in after an entire chapter, and then verse 4 of chapter 2, I am saying these things so that no one might deceive you with fine-sounding arguments. And that's all he says. And then verse 8, to skip down a few verses in verse 8, he says, see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit according to human traditions, according to the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ.

There's the second hint that we get that there might be something wrong. But I think it becomes even more clear when we jump ahead to verse 16 of chapter 2. Paul says, therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festivals and new moons or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on humility and the worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by human ways of thinking and not holding fast to the head, which is Jesus Christ. Then I'll skip down to verse 20. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you still live as if you belong to the world? Why do you submit to the regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.

So, because of those verses, most today are convinced that yes, Paul was addressing some kind of deviant teaching. There's some kind of teaching that had infiltrated or maybe was just beginning to infiltrate the Colossian church that had Paul concerned, and that's why he sits down and writes this letter to try to head it off or to combat this teaching that he's afraid some of the Colossians might be duped into thinking is correct, or some might be considering becoming part of or following. Now the problem then, so I guess a mediating position I guess would be that yes, Paul is addressing some kind of a false teaching, but the situation doesn't appear to be as dire or as serious as it was in Galatian.

Or again, go back to Galatians where from the very first verse, he skips the thanksgiving and says, I am astonished that you would so quickly turn from the gospel. But now he doesn't say anything until chapter two. So maybe we should infer from this that yes, there is a false teaching, but perhaps it's not quite as serious, or maybe it has not yet infiltrated the church and started actually leading people astray.

But can we be more specific? What is this teaching that Paul is combating? Like I said, when we looked at Galatians, just about everybody agrees that Paul is addressing Judaizers, that is Jewish Christians who are trying to force Gentiles to submit to the law of Moses. Faith in Jesus Christ is not enough, but one must submit to the Mosaic law and live life as a Jew in order to be God's people. That's fairly clear, but Colossians is a little bit different.

In fact, there have been a number of proposals and explanations as to what might be going on. What is this teaching that seems to have Paul concerned and worried, that he must warn the Colossians not to be deceived or led astray? And the problem is the evidence seems to go a number of ways. For example, if I read chapter 2 and verse 8, See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition.

So, whatever this teaching was, Paul labeled it a philosophy, and also, he saw it based on nothing more than human tradition and was something that could deceitfully lead the Colossians astray. So, we could ask, what could fall under that description of a philosophy based on human description or human traditions? Well, let's read a little bit further in that next section, starting with verse 16. He says, Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festival new moons or Sabbaths.

What does that suggest about the nature of this teaching? Who would observe new moons, festivals, and Sabbaths? Jews. In fact, that three-fold phrase, new moons, festivals, and Sabbaths, is found in the Old Testament. Interestingly, it's also found in the Qumran literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls.

So, I'm convinced that whatever this false teaching is, it is some kind of Judaism that Paul, again, is dealing with Judaizers, whom he sees now in danger of leading his readers astray. In fact, it used to be very common to, well, let me read on. What about this one here? Do not let anyone disqualify you insisting on humility and worship of angels, dwelling on visions puffed up without cause by the human way of thinking.

Now, whatever it is, worships angels or is involved in some way with worshipping the angels or worshipping with the angels. And then he goes on and says, why do you submit to its regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, which seems like some kind of an extreme ascetic practice of avoiding physical pleasure or avoiding physical contact with certain things. Now, some have suggested what you have going on here is actually an amalgamation of several religious philosophies and beliefs.

So, you have a little bit of Judaism, and you have a little bit of Gnosticism, maybe. We've talked all about these things. You have perhaps a little bit of other pagan religions, some of the things we talked about way back in the beginning of the semester.

So, some have said this is some kind of a syncretism of Jewish beliefs and other pagan beliefs. The problem is there's really no evidence that that would have happened, that Judaism would have syncretized to the extent that some are suggesting with the false teaching behind Colossians. From what we know of most Jewish religions, although they were influenced by Hellenism and Greek ways of thinking, is still they would have been concerned to maintain their purity as the people of God.

So, I am convinced, that there's no need to look outside of Judaism for the false teachers behind the Colossians. And there are two possibilities. Number one, we actually have a number of texts that we call apocalypses.

That is, these are texts resemble the book of Revelation and Daniel. That is an account of someone's visionary experience where they ascend to heaven, and they see the heavenly realms, which include angelic beings, and includes, in some apocalypses, visions of angels worshipping, even joining angels in worship.

And some suggest even places where angels themselves must be placated in worship. So, this mystical, visionary type experience was a common phenomenon in Judaism. Again, you can read all these apocalypses.

We have English translations. They didn't make it into the Old and New Testaments, but they still testify to what many Jews thought in the first century. But second, I'm convinced, too, another possibility is the references to food and drink.

He says, don't let anyone judge you in matters of food and drink. The references to new moons, festivals, and Sabbaths, the worship of angels and visions, harsh treatment of the body, humility, and even boasting, reference to boasting and what one's seen. Interestingly, all of these elements can be found in the Essenes or in the Qumran community, especially are testified in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

So, I wonder if the Judaism that Paul is combating is not either this apocalyptic type Judaism that emphasized mystical visions and visionary experience, or whether it may have been a Judaism like the Essenes and the Dead Sea community that valued strict observance of the Sabbath. They observed ceremonial purity, avoiding contact with certain things. There are even references, there are even some documents in the Qumran community that testify to this mystical experience of actually worshiping with the angels, joining the angels in worship in the heavenly realms.

So, in my opinion, I think Paul is not addressing some syncretism or some amalgamation of Jewish and pagan beliefs all mixed up in one, but I think he's just addressing a Judaism of the day, and that is either an apocalyptic type or an Essene or Qumran type of Judaism. The problem is this Judaism has now become attractive, apparently, to some of his readers, and now Paul must warn them about the danger of giving in to this teaching or going along with this mystical type of Judaism, this apocalyptic type or Essene or Qumran type of Judaism. So, to summarize, the purpose of Colossians is Paul then will wrote Colossians to warn his readers not to be led astray by this false teaching, this Judaism, that offers an alternative to the life that they have in Christ Jesus.

So, Paul's going to write to warn the Colossians not to give in to this Judaizing teaching as an alternative to what they have in Christ Jesus. And what he's going to do is emphasize they have everything they need in Christ Jesus and that they don't need what this mystical or Qumran type of Judaism has to offer them. With their asceticism, their worship of angels, and visionary experience, they don't need that as a substitute for what they have in Christ because they already have everything they need in Christ Jesus.

All right, any questions so far just about the background of the book or what Paul's doing, why he's writing? Good. And I actually hope to develop this more in writing because it's really never been proposed. Most people are still convinced that when

you read Colossians, it's kind of a mixture of Judaism and other pagan religious thoughts like Gnosticism and other pagan religious beliefs kind of rolled up in one.

But again, I'm not convinced that's the case, and I don't think we need to look beyond Judaism to find all the elements in the teaching that Paul addresses in Colossians. So, I hope to develop that more at some point. So, I'm kind of testing this out.

So someday if it turns out to be wrong, I apologize, but I don't think it is. All right, what is the theme of Colossians? If I were to provide a main theme, and maybe not the main theme, but a main theme, that would be the supremacy of Christ. In fact, that's what Paul argues all throughout his letter, that because of the supremacy and absolute sufficiency of Christ, they don't need what this mystical type of Judaism and its experiences have to offer them.

In fact, as we're going to see, Paul's main problem with this false teaching, this Jewish religion, is not just theological, but it's also ethical. His problem is that this Judaism and all its ascetic practices and mystical experience do nothing to defeat the power of sin. But in Christ, they do have the ability to overcome sin and its power.

By virtue of being joined with Christ in his death and resurrection, they have everything they need to overcome sin's power. So why would they want to buy into this Judaism whose asceticism and mystical experiences do nothing to overcome sin and overcome the desires of the flesh? So, the superiority or the supremacy of Christ over all things is a dominant theme in Paul. And Paul develops that theme very early in his letter, all the way back in chapter 1. Here is the second of the so-called Christ hymns.

We already looked at one back in Philippians 2 and verses 6 through 11. Here's the second one, Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 through 20. And again, some people ask, well, did Paul write this? Or is he borrowing a pre-existing hymn? Is he using a hymn or a poem that the early church knew of and used, and now Paul's using it because it says what he wants to say? Or did Paul write this? Again, I'm not interested in settling that question.

But again, it's more important to ask, how does this hymn function? Starting in verse 15, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, all things have been created through Him and for Him. He Himself is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

He is the head of His body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might have preeminence or have first place in everything. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him, God was pleased

to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of His cross.

Now, one of the reasons I think why putting this hymn so early in the letter was because if He can get them to buy into that, and after seeing this exalted depiction of Christ in this Christological hymn, hopefully, they'll be more inclined to accept His warnings to avoid this false teaching. Hopefully, they'll agree with Him that this false teaching, this mystical Judaism, really has nothing to offer them. If they hear this hymn and this poem, they will hopefully understand that they have everything they need in Christ, and they don't need what this mystical Judaism has to offer its asceticism and its visionary and mystical-type experiences. Now, just a few things to say about this hymn. First of all, notice how the hymn is divided.

First of all, in verses 15 through 17, Jesus is portrayed as the Lord over the first creation. So, kind of in alluding back to Genesis chapters 1 and 2, now Jesus is seen as the primary agent of the creation of the universe. So, Paul portrays Jesus as Lord over the first creation, over the entire universe.

He is Lord over the heavens and the earth, and everything in heaven and earth owe their existence to Jesus Christ. However, Paul is also convinced the fact that Jesus is Lord over creation means that He is able to bring creation to its true goal. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has now established a new creation.

And the assumption is, the same assumption with Ephesians, the assumption is sin has caused a dislocation, sin has in a sense ruined the first creation, so that now God must institute a new creative act to bring creation to its goal of a new creation. And now Paul is convinced that has happened through Jesus Christ. So, He is not only the Lord over the first creation, but over new creation.

As Lord of the first creation, He is able to bring creation to its intended goal of a brand new created act that has already, and this is the idea that he shares with Ephesians, the book of Ephesians, this has already been demonstrated through the church. The church is the first installment of the new creation, where God is beginning to reconcile all things to Himself. Actually, Jesus' resurrection, He's called the firstborn from the dead.

Jesus' resurrection is the inauguration of the new creation. But the creation of the church as a reconciled humanity is also part of this new creative act that Jesus Christ has now inaugurated. A couple of other things, though.

Jesus is portrayed as the image of the invisible God, and also the firstborn of all creation. Interestingly, these are terms in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature that were applied to wisdom. Wisdom was seen as the image of God.

Wisdom was seen as existing alongside God. Wisdom was seen as the agent of creation. But now, Paul, although most Jews in the first century and before and after would have identified wisdom with the Torah, the law, Paul says, that Jesus Christ is the true embodiment of God's wisdom.

So, Paul uses categories from wisdom, the image of God, the creator, the thing through which all things are created, and the firstborn of all creation. Much of that language reflects how the Old Testament and other Jewish literature portrayed wisdom. So, Jesus is portrayed as the wisdom of God, the true revealer of God.

However, this phrase also is interesting, the firstborn of all creation. We might tend to read that in the wrong way. But this phrase actually comes out of Psalm 89, which is a psalm about the Messiah, the Davidic King.

And there, firstborn clearly refers to sovereignty and authority over creation. So calling Jesus the firstborn of creation has nothing to do with the fact that Jesus was created or that there was a time when he did not exist and now he comes into existence. Firstborn has nothing to do with actual birth or production.

It has to do with status or sovereignty. So, in Psalm 89, the King is the firstborn because he is the sovereign ruler over all creation. So, by calling Jesus the firstborn of creation, it's a term of his authority and sovereignty over the entire creation as the King, as the Davidic King in fulfillment of Psalm 89.

So again, the author has piled all these phrases up from wisdom literature and the Old Testament to depict Jesus as the sovereign ruler over all creation, the first creation and the second creation, the new creation, so that the conclusion is, what more do the readers need? What could they possibly find in this mystical type of Judaism, this Qumran or Essene type or apocalyptic type of Judaism? What could they possibly find in that that could supplement or provide an alternative to what they have in Christ? So, after this exalted hymn of Christ, in the rest of the letter, then Paul is going to begin to argue in more detail based on that, why is it that the readers should be aware of it and not give in to this Judaism, this false teaching. And why is it that they should simply trust in their union with Jesus Christ as providing everything that they need? In the rest of the letter, we'll argue that and we'll look at it.

This was Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, lecture 22 on Philippians and Colossians.