

THE COMPASS

A Town Called Punishment

Postcards From Paul, Part 6

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I'd like to take you to a town called Punishment.

In Asia Minor, which we now know as the Republic of Turkey, back in the days of the apostle Paul, there was the town of Punishment.

In the language of the day: Colosse.

This word, Colosse, isn't related to our word *colossal* — Colosse means *punishment*.

Colosse was unusual for more than just its name.

In fact, of all the cities that the apostle Paul sent his letters to, Colosse is the strangest.

You remember Ephesus, where we visited a couple sessions ago? The Hollywood of Asia Minor?

Ephesus sat on the west coast of what we now call Turkey. It was a bright-lights-big-city kind of place. A tourist trap.

About 100 miles inland from Ephesus, we come to the Lycus River Valley, and Colosse.

Colosse used to be great. Used to be full of people, plenty of traffic, plenty of money. But then the Roman armies came through, conquered Asia Minor, made this whole region a part of the Roman Empire.

By the time Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, they lived in a declining little town. Business had tailed off. People had boarded up their businesses and moved out.

The Romans had moved the old highway, and traffic was diverted — instead of going through Colosse, all the traffic was now going around Colosse.

So Colosse became kind of a forgotten little backwater.

In fact, in this part of the country, there were three little towns clustered within a few miles of each other, and they all sort of withered away — but Colosse withered the most.

It's as if the town's name — Punishment — had somehow shaped its destiny.

But in any case, there were churches in Colosse and the other little towns of the area. So Paul sent a letter to the Christians at Colosse, with instructions to circulate this letter to the churches in the other little towns around there.

Paul had never been to Colosse. So for once, Paul is writing to people he's never met. He's only heard about what they're like, and what they're going through.

So he asks God to help him communicate exactly the truths that they need ... exactly the concepts that will help them the most.

And God gives him something that will not only help the Colossians at the moment, but will help us, 2,000 years later.

What does God lead him to say?

Hey, friends, life is like a cruise, and you are on this cruise all-expenses-paid. Jesus paid full fare, in advance, and you are riding free. Anybody who says you have to pay more is ripping you off. You don't have to do any religious rituals — you can if you want, but you don't have to. He says,

Colossians 2:

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Jesus has given you everything you need to be right with God and live according to God's design.

10 ...You have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

So when I have the urge to cheat on my taxes — something that's going to corrode my spirit, something that will hurt me and hurt others — I can stop and say to myself, "Wait a minute, I don't need this. I don't have to feel this anxiety about my finances. I don't have to rationalize and cheat this way. I have been given fullness in Christ. He has total power and authority over my situation."

So when I get the idea to flirt with a woman who's not my wife — something that's going to corrode my spirit, something that will hurt me and hurt others — I can stop and say to myself, "Wait a minute, I don't need this. I don't have to be a slave to my need for attention, or a slave to my sex drive, or a slave to my fantasy life. I don't need to rationalize and cheat this way. I have been given fullness in Christ. He has total power and authority over my situation."

So when I feel panicky over the doctor's report on my condition — so when I hear some gossip about you and my first instinct is to repeat that story to someone else — so when my nature inclines me NOT to love people in any way — I do not have to go there.

I have been given "**fullness in Christ.**" I don't have to make up for some lacking in my life, by grasping for advantage or by hurting you.

I'm full, thanks to Jesus — and whatever power I need to live by God's design, I have that power, because Jesus bought and paid for it.

Paul says in the very next line that I can "**put off**" the "**sinful nature**" [**"putting off the sinful nature" (Colossians 2:11)**] — and he says this is something that Jesus does for me. Religion doesn't do it for me. Paul says this "putting off of the sinful nature" is "**not ... done by the hands of men but ... done by Christ.**"

No religious routine makes me holy.

No membership in a religious organization gives me more willpower over sin.

I can imagine Paul sitting there in his prison cell, writing this letter, wracking his brain — "How can I get this concept through to these people? What is going to communicate this idea adequately to them?"

And suddenly, the Spirit of God inspires Paul to paint a word-picture so vivid and so unusual that he never used it in any other letters he wrote; in fact, we don't find these words anywhere else in the entire Bible.

Even the translators of the Scriptures, down through the years, haven't been able to figure out quite how to render this concept in English.

But to the Colossians 2,000 years ago — people living in a town called Punishment — it made total sense.

And if we can somehow come to understand this the way the Colossians understood it, it will literally change the way we live.

Here's what he says:

Colossians 2:

13 When you were dead in your sins and ... your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,

14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us [the religious rules, the old religious law that God used to show people how totally dependent on him they really were]; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

And we may think this was a dramatic way of putting it — but it's the NEXT line that knocked the Colossians over:

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

There is no good word in our language to express these ideas of “disarming” and “triumphing.”

What is he talking about? Well, when the Romans conquered a country, they didn't just bring the soldiers home and breathe a sigh of relief and say, “Whew! Glad that's over!”

No. They celebrated — and they celebrated in a way that would maximize the humiliation of the losers.

The Roman senate would officially decree the triumph, and then they would stage an enormous parade.

According to Barbara F. McManus of The College of New Rochelle:

First came horn-blowers, and pagan priests with sacrificial animals — often these were pure white bulls, which were raised specifically for these triumphal processions.

Next were the “bearers,” who carried the shields, weapons, and armor that the Roman army had captured from the enemy.

Next in the parade were people from the country that lost — not the soldiers who had fought in the trenches; they would take the top leaders, the politicians and the generals and so on.

They were stripped down, their hands were tied behind them, and they were marched through the city in disgrace.

Finally, there were the victorious Roman soldiers, in their parade dress, followed by the Roman senators and other politicians.

And then — the victorious Roman general, the guy who had run the whole war, in special clothes, riding in a gilded chariot pulled by 4 horses.

He carried a small ivory scepter topped with the image of an eagle.

And since all of this made him look and feel like a god, they would position a slave to stand behind him in the chariot and repeatedly remind him that he was only a mortal.

The emperor, meanwhile, would sit in an open chariot and review the whole thing as it

passed by; and the people along the parade route would yell and scream, shaming the losers and heralding the emperor as the great hero. The leaders of the vanquished country would typically get to the end of the parade, at Jupiter's Temple, and be executed. But the young, strong soldiers, and the women and children, had long-term value — so they became slaves.

This is the shocking picture Paul is painting for the Colossians. And they understood it. They were people who not only lived in a town called Punishment — they had been conquered by Rome. Their lives had been impacted by the Empire. When Paul talked about “disarming” and “making a public spectacle” and “triumphing over” the powers and authorities, they had a powerful visceral reaction.

But this wasn't the Roman army subjugating the people of Asia Minor. This was Jesus, subjugating the powers and authorities of my world, of my life. And not by swinging a sword or throwing a spear or catapulting big rocks over the castle wall.

“By the cross.”

When Jesus hung on that cross and gave up the fight — totally backwards from what you would expect, if the idea is to win the battle — through that amazing strategy, Jesus stripped the armor off of every one of my personal demons. He handcuffed my selfishness impulse. He humiliated my pride drive. He zapped my compulsion to cheat. He evaporated my anxiety about money. He disarmed my worries about my health. He broke the legs of my contempt for people who are different from me. He shattered the bones of my obsessive pursuit of comfort. He decimated my paranoia about what people think of me.

And he did it big. He did it totally. He did it obviously. He did it publicly. He didn't slip into a monastery somewhere and write it on parchment and slip it out through a crack in the door. He went high on a hill, up on a cross, arms extended, naked for all the world to see — when he hung there bleeding and hurting, that was a victory salute. He knew that he was going down into the depths, to where I was living — down to the Dead Zone — and bring both of us back alive. So today he says to me:

*When that pride thing wells back up in you, look up here at me!
I fought that fight already; I won that war for you. Pride is not your master. Pride is my slave — subject to me, Jesus Christ.*

*When that selfishness impulse comes bothering you again, look up here at me!
I fought that fight already; I won that war for you. Selfishness is not your master. Selfishness is my slave — subject to me, Jesus Christ.*

When you're tempted, look up here at me.

I fought that fight already.

When you're anxious about the future, look up here at me.

I won that war for you.

When you're fixated on your status or your reputation, look up here at me.

When you're driven by your sex drive, when you're controlled by some chemical, when you're in bondage to your own emotions, look up here at me.

This junk is not in charge of you. I am the master over all this stuff.

I am Jesus Christ, and I have stripped all of these demons of their armor.

They have no power over you.

If I am allowing this kind of stuff to diminish the quality of my life — to hamper my ability to love God and love people — it is because I have somehow made the decision to unshackle one of those prisoners in the parade ... take him home, dress him up ... and let him order me around.

It's wrong, it's ridiculous. I'm taking unnecessary punishment.

Paul tells the Colossians to get up, LOOK UP:

Colossians 3:

1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

If I get this — if I live the kind of life that Jesus bought and paid for — then a secret 24/7 webcam recording of my life will look way different from the life of someone who isn't.

I won't be engaged in the power plays of this world.

I won't be haggling over how somebody put me down or offended me.

I won't be cussing the neighbor with the noisy dog.

I won't be shading the truth to gain the upper hand in a dispute with the vice-president of my business division.

I won't be living in a town called Punishment.

All the influences and impulses that would lead to that kind of self-destructive, relationship-damaging stuff will be subjugated to the authority of my own personal conquering hero, the one I've chosen as my king: Jesus Christ.

This isn't magical or mystical. It isn't something that happens after I've been a Christian a certain number of years, or after I've memorized enough Bible verses, or after I get holy enough.

It's a matter of deciding, every morning of my life, who the Master is. And who the slaves are. And living accordingly.

Paul says to the Colossians, and God says to us:

Colossians 3:

8 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices

10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Here again, our English language is so lame. When Paul says "you have taken off

your old self,” what is he really saying?

In his actual, original letter to the Colossians, he doesn't say “taken off.” He uses exactly the same unusual word as before — the word we translate as “disabled” or “defeated” or “stripped” or “spoiled.”

I sympathize with the Scripture translators; they had to tear their hair out over this word — *apekduomai*.

But the best overall definition they seem to have been able to come up with is this: “to completely strip off for one's own advantage.”

When you accept the work that Jesus did for you, you have the power to strip off your old self. Your old practices. Your old way of doing things. And it's to your advantage. It's a better life — the life God dreamed for you when he first dreamed you up. The life lived according to the blueprint you were designed by.

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One more point — let's take just a brief reality check. Because there is junk that we just can't seem to let go of. Junk that just won't seem to let go of us.

Sometimes they're referred to as “besetting sins.”

Even when we don't want to keep them, we keep them anyway.

We find ourselves falling back into them day after day.

Paul himself experienced this. He wrote to the Romans about it.

He says in **Romans 7:15**, “**I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.**”

We've all experienced this phenomenon.

What's happening to us here?

We're believing a lie — the lie that this action will meet some need in our lives.

And repeatedly believing the lie, repeatedly returning to that “besetting sin,” can dig deep ruts in our minds.

Ruts that we cannot break out of overnight.

So how do you break out of the rut of a “besetting sin”?

If you ask the founder of our Compass DVD ministry, David G. Brown, here's the answer you'll get:

Frankly, I am still working on mine. I am still not out.

So perhaps I am the wrong person to make any suggestions.

But here is my strategy:

- *I try to tell myself the truth constantly.*
- *I get help — from a friend or a minister or a counselor.*
- *I try to skip the guilt — it only keeps you in the rut. That's why Paul wrote, in **Romans 8:1,2**, “**...There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.**”*
- *I try to discern the lie — figure out what is really the underlying problem, the underlying need, that I'm trying to address.*
- *I ask God to meet that need.*
- *I try to live as if I believed the truth — in other words, act contrary to my feelings.*

- *I take small steps.*

Maybe I'm in some kind of "sin rut."

But the rut I'm in can keep me seeking God.

Trying to get out of my rut is what God values, because it reminds me of my need for his grace, and it drives me to him.

David went so far as to say these words, which really made me stop and think:
"I believe God is more pleased by my struggling than by my being victorious —
because we grow in the tough times, not in the easy times!"