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MINISTRIES

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

In Colossians 2:17, Paul refers to the Sabbath, new moons, and festivals as a “[shadow of the things to come](#).” What does it mean for these parts of God’s law to be a shadow of things to come? In this short teaching, we will explore that question.

Let’s take a look at the passage:

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.](#)

Before we get into the main topic, we want to say a few words about the practical relevance of the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws. Many people point to this passage as proof that Paul no longer thought that Christians should keep these parts of God’s law. This interpretation is based on the assumption that Paul’s readers did not observe these commandments and that Paul’s opponents were judging his readers for not observing them. In other words, Paul tells the Colossian believers not to accept judgment from those who were telling them that they must keep these commandments. In our teaching “[Let No One Judge You: Sabbaths, Festivals, and Foods \(Colossians 2:16-17\)](#),” we challenge the fundamental assumption of that interpretation. It turns out that there is good evidence for thinking that Paul’s readers *did* keep these commandments. There is also good evidence for thinking that Paul’s opponents did *not* keep them and were critical of those who did. Hence, Paul’s readers were not being judged for neglecting the Sabbath and festivals; instead, they were being judged for observing them! Paul’s opponents in Colossians were likely adherents of Cynic philosophy, who objected to the feasting, drinking, and joyful anticipation associated with the Sabbaths, new moons, and festivals. Again, see our teaching “[Let No One Judge you: Sabbaths, Festivals, and Foods \(Colossians 2:16-17\)](#)” to learn more.

In this teaching, we want to talk about how the Sabbath, festivals, and new moon are “[a shadow of the things to come](#).” What did Paul mean by this?

Interpreters often suggest that “[things to come](#)” refers to the Messiah’s work on the cross. That is to say, the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons are prophetic symbols or “shadows” that point to what the Messiah accomplished when he died and rose again. This interpretation is further supported by the next part of the verse: “[but the substance belongs to Christ](#).” It would seem that Paul is contrasting the Sabbath and festivals, which are “shadows,” with Christ, who is the “substance.” Hence, the Sabbath and festivals ultimately point to Christ, who fulfilled those things when he died on the cross. Proponents of this interpretation will then take it further and suggest that such observances are no longer relevant now that Christ has fulfilled them.

It is true that the festivals are connected to the Messiah’s work on the cross. For example, both John the Baptist and the apostle Paul connect the Messiah’s death to the sacrifice of the Passover lamb (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7). Like the blood of the lamb delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, the Messiah’s blood delivers us from slavery to sin and death (Romans 6:6, 16-18). For a summary of how the Messiah fulfills each of the biblical festivals, see our short teaching, “[How the Biblical Festivals Point to Christ](#).”

But is Paul’s point in Colossians 2:17 to say that Christ’s death and resurrection fulfilled the Sabbath and festivals? We would say no for a couple of reasons. First, contrary to misleading English translations like the NIV, Paul does not say “things that *were* to come” or “things that *have* come.” Instead, he says, “things to come.” This indicates that these things have *not yet* occurred. In other words, for the Colossian believers, the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons point to *future* events. Thus, Paul does not seem to be referring to the work of Christ on the cross that had already happened by the time Paul wrote to the Colossian believers. He is talking about the future.

Hope for the future is a major theme in Colossians. As the scholar Herold Weiss writes:

[T]he author of Colossians insists that ultimate reality is in the future, when the “things to come” come...He defines the mystery in which the Colossians now have a share as “Christ in you the hope of glory” (1:27). He is concerned that they may abandon “the hope” (1:23), rather than “the faith.” In the introductory thanksgiving he praises God “because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (1:5). In view of what the future holds for them, he instructs his readers “to make the most of the time” (4:5), since the Parousia is not far away. When the expected Parousia takes place and Christ appears, the author reminds them that they “will appear in glory” as well (3:4). Rather than to find present worship with angels and visions appealing, this author has his hopes firmly tied to the glorious future coming of Christ.

—Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 136

So, the idea that Paul is looking backward to the Messiah’s work on the cross does not account for what he literally says in the verse. He is referring to “things to come,” not “things that came.”

But what about the final clause of the verse, which contrasts the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons with Christ as “the substance”?

Colossians 2:17

[These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.](#)

Even if we grant this translation of the verse, it does not negate what Paul said in the previous clause

about the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons being a shadow of “things to come.” If we say that these observances are shadows that point to Christ as the substance, that will have to include not just his past work on the cross but also his future work in bringing about God’s kingdom. Thus, the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons continue to point forward to Christ’s future work. We are still waiting for Christ to bring the full “substance” of his kingdom into this world.

Having said that, however, there are reasons to doubt the common translation of this verse. First, the word “substance” is translated from the Greek word *σῶμα*. But *σῶμα* does not mean “substance”; it means “body,” and this is how it is translated nearly everywhere else it is used. Also, “belongs to” does not appear in the Greek. A literal translation of this final clause is simply “but the body of Christ.” The ESV and other translations use the word “substance” and insert extra words like “belongs to” because they assume that Paul is contrasting the idea of a “shadow” with the idea of a “body.” So, they use “substance” to indicate that the body, Christ, is the “real thing,” while the shadow—the Sabbath and festivals—are just a hollow imitation of that thing. However, Paul is not contrasting “body” with “shadow” in this verse. Grammatically, the final clause in verse 17 (“but the body of Christ”) is connected to the beginning of verse 16 (“let no one judge you”). So, the contrast would be the following: “let no one judge you...but the body of Christ” (See Troy Martin, “But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17), *JBL* 11/2 (1995): 249-255; See also Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 135).

What Paul is saying is that the Colossians should not listen to the judgment of the unbelievers who were criticizing them, but instead they should consider the resurrected body of Christ. Again, we discuss the grammar and meaning of the final clause of verse 17 in more detail in our teaching, [“Let No One Judge You: Sabbaths, Festivals, and Foods \(Colossians 2:16-17\).”](#) We would refer you to that teaching for a more detailed explanation. But the point here is that, contrary to many English translations, Paul is not saying that the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons are shadows of the substance that belongs to Christ. All he says is that they are “[a shadow of the things to come.](#)”

If Paul is not referring to the Messiah’s death and resurrection in Colossians 2:17, what is he referring to? What are “[the things to come](#)”? It would seem that “[the things to come](#)” refer to all the glorious promises that await believers in the future Messianic kingdom. That is why, throughout Colossians, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the future “hope” that believers possess (Colossians 1:5, 23, 27; 3:1-2, 4). The Sabbath, festivals, and new moons point to this future reality. We see this connection between the celebration of the Sabbath and festivals and the age to come in Isaiah:

Isaiah 66:22-23

[For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD \[YHWH\], so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD \[YHWH\].](#)

So, Scripture explicitly associates the Sabbath and new moons with the new heavens and new earth. They are shadows of the age “to come.” Herold Weiss puts this point well:

The shadow of what is to come does not refer to shadows of the Christ who has already come and made these observances obsolete. In this case, the “shadow” is the present blurred manifestation of a hoped-for future reality. In its shadow the expected future is seen as coming...In reference to this future, he declares that the dietary and calendric observances his

readers are involved in are a “shadow,” or an intimation of the future. This is clearly a way of giving them value.

—Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 136

This might raise the question: *how* do these observances function as a shadow of the future age to come? The first part of verse 16 gives us a clue. One of the things Paul’s readers were being criticized for was “eating and drinking” (Colossians 2:16, YLT). Since Paul’s opponents were Cynic philosophers, they opposed the enjoyment of festive foods and wine (Crates, *Epistle* 14, 18; Diogenes, *Epistle* 37). Paul tells his readers not to accept judgement from these critics regarding eating and drinking. This eating and drinking is tied to the festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. Those occasions are all about rest, joy, and celebration, often involving the enjoyment of wine and festive foods.

For instance, in Deuteronomy 16, the people are literally commanded to “rejoice” during the festivals of Shavuot and Sukkot (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14). One of the purposes of Sukkot is to celebrate the harvest of grapes for producing wine:

Deuteronomy 16:13

You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress.

The command to rejoice during the festivals is likely the reason Nehemiah commands the people not to mourn or weep during Sukkot. He urges them instead to rejoice and to enjoy good foods and sweet wine:

Nehemiah 8:9-13

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Similarly, the Bible depicts the new moons as customary occasions for feasting and rejoicing (1 Samuel 20; Psalm 81:1-3). Isaiah describes the Sabbath as a day the people are to find delight in (Isaiah 58:13).

What do these festive occasions have to do with the age to come? Well, Scripture describes the age to come as a time of great rejoicing, including feasting and drinking quality wine:

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the LORD [YHWH] of hosts will make for all peoples **a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined**. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD [YHWH] will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD [YHWH] has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for

him, that he might save us. This is the LORD [YHWH]; we have waited for him; **let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.**”

Isaiah 65:17-19

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. **But be glad and rejoice forever** in that which I create; for behold, **I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.** I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.

Jeremiah 31:10-14

Hear the word of the LORD [YHWH], O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’ For the LORD [YHWH] has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. **They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD [YHWH], over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd;** their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. **Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.** I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the LORD [YHWH].”

It would seem, then, that the feasting, drinking, and celebration experienced during the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons *foreshadow* this coming kingdom. These events are just a small taste of the joy that awaits us in the future kingdom. That is what Paul means when he says they are a “*shadow of things to come*.” When we feast and celebrate during God’s appointed festivals, we are looking forward to the time when we will feast and celebrate with Christ in the age to come:

Luke 22:28-30

You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

In conclusion, Paul’s reference to the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons as “*a shadow of the things to come*” in Colossians 2:17 suggests that these observances point to future realities in God’s kingdom. Contrary to the common interpretation that Paul dismissed the importance of these practices, there is strong evidence to suggest that he was affirming their value. The language of “*things to come*” indicates a forward-looking perspective, emphasizing the hope and future fulfillment of God’s promises. The joyous and celebratory nature of these observances foreshadows the ultimate joy and fulfillment in the age to come. Thus, these observances serve as a small taste of the future joy that believers will experience.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

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

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