



Sermon – January 17, 2021  
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**Verses Covered This Week**

*Colossians 2:4 - 5*

Let me invite you to open your Bibles with me. We're going to be back in the book of Colossians chapter 2, verses 4 and 5 this morning. And if you're with us for the first time, whether in the room or online, welcome home. We're so glad you're here. And this Sunday is a unique Sunday in the life of our church. There are churches around the country that on this Sunday are celebrating something known as Sanctity of Life Sunday. This week marks the 48<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade decision that legalized abortion. And today, as we come to God's word, we're going to think about how God calls us to stand for life. Since that ruling back in 1973, there have been over 50 million abortions in our country. Put that in perspective, over the course of the past year since the COVID pandemic has taken off, we've lost nearly 400,000 lives in our country to this disease. Every one of them tragic. But if you do the math, if you go all the way back to 1973 until today and you run the numbers on 50 million over 48 years, what you'll find is that every year since 1973, there's been more than 2 times the numbers of babies lost to abortion than the number of people that have died this year from COVID. God feels passionately about this issue. And I know, statistically speaking, that there is no doubt in my mind, whether you're in the room or watching online, there are people that are gathered here today where abortion's a part of your past. Maybe you chose to have one or to encourage one or to pay for one. And as we come to God's word and reflect on this reality, what I hope you hear this morning is not a message of judgment about your past, but a message of hope about your future. Because that's what we're going to find when we turn our attention back to our text in Colossian chapter 2 in verse 4. Follow along with me to what the apostle Paul says to us this morning.

<sup>4</sup>I say this so that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. <sup>5</sup>For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Let's pray together.

Father, as we come to You this morning, we pray that You would ready our hearts to hear from You. We ask that You would release us from the vice grips of our anxious thoughts and take us captive by Your word. And we ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.

Eric and Ruth Brown were a typical Christian family. I got to know them some when I lived in Nashville. He was a photographer. She was a mom of two kids and they had a third one on the way. And if you've had those babies before, you know what it's like to go to that 20-week ultrasound, the day you're going to find out the gender. It's one of those you're excited, there's going to be a boy or a girl. You're finally going to know. And as the technician took the ultrasound machine and gave them a window into the womb, instead of excitement, they sensed uncertainty from her. They sensed that something wasn't right. And she quickly left the room and then came back and with tears in her eyes, told Eric and Ruth that something was wrong with their baby. That she would need to send them on to a specialist in order to find out what it is because it did not look good. The prognosis for the future of this baby to live seemed uncertain. And I want to tell you their story throughout the message today. But I don't want you to just hear it from my words, I want you to see it. Because on the screen, I'm going to show a couple of different clips from a documentary that my old organization, the ERLC, put together, telling the life of their daughter Pearl Brown. So turn your attention to the screens and see what happened next after they had this uncertain future put before them with this ultrasound reading.

She had a condition called Alobar holoprosencephaly which they said was not compatible with life. And basically it means that her brain wasn't forming properly. *Um*, there was a lot more fluid and less brain matter inside her head. And advised us to go ahead and head across the hallway and terminate the pregnancy and go home and be thankful we had two other kids. And while we were very much happy with Brennan and Abbey, Pearl was also our kid and our job was to protect her. And so that's what we did. Yeah, it seemed like he was just presenting us with the, this is the obvious thing that you do. There's really not anything other than to head across the hallway and terminate. When we said that we couldn't do that, we had just seen our baby girl moving on the ultrasound. She waved. I could not force her out of my body at that point and give up. I couldn't do it. To us, the only option was to support our daughter as long as we could.

Could you imagine that moment? This technician sends them to a specialist. And as they stand before him, in cold lifeless words, he just tells them the only obvious solution is to end the life of this child. They head across the hallway and let's terminate it. And the reason for that is because this doctor knew that only 3% of babies that had this disease ever see the light of day. And none of them are able to live very long. Why would you go through this suffering? Why would you put yourself through this? This baby won't amount to anything in the future. It seemed to reasonable coming from those doctor's lips that they should choose the way of death instead of the way of life. And what we find throughout Scripture, and what we find throughout the entire story of humanity is there are often times where we are faced with reasonable arguments. Plausible arguments that on the face of them seem wise, but fly in the face of God's design for the world. And in particular this morning, his heart for life. And what we're going to find in Colossians 2, verses 4 and 5, is that as Paul begins to address the threat that false teachers are bringing in the midst of the Colossian church, he is showing us how they work. These false teachers base their arguments on things that seem reasonable; that lead us astray by making them attractive. And what we're going to notice this morning as we unpack this text on this Sanctity

of Life Sunday is we will see two ways we are called to stand for life through resisting and through rejoicing.

So look back at verse 4. You're going to notice the first thing that Paul calls us to is to stand for life by resisting the way of death. He calls us to stand for life because we stand on a firm foundation. Now what is it? Well that's what he's speaking of at the beginning of verse 4 when he says, I say this. He's looking back to what he's just said. He's spoken about the mystery of Christ, about how amazing are the riches that we have in Him. And he does that to lay a foundation to resist these false teachers. Because what were they trying to do? Well, notice how he says it there in verse 4. That no one may delude you. So what does it mean to delude you? Well, back in that ancient culture, those who were educated were well trained in the art of persuasion. But this is more than that. It's not persuasion, but deception. It's to lead others astray. To use your words to defraud or deceive, to cheat, to cause to miscalculate. What Paul is speaking here is deception is the way of death. And Paul is calling us to stand firm against it. When our family grew up, we moved all over the country. And we spent a few years living up in Connecticut. And one of the things as a young child I looked forward to most was going to the grocery store. And the reason was because of the unique grocery store that was up there was this place called Stew Leonard's that you've never heard of before. But if you went to the northeast, it's known up there as the Disney World of grocery stores. You can walk in and they've got these lights, these animatronic animals. They've got free things to give to all the children that are there. Every child wants to go any chance they get. It's their dream come true. But for some parents, during that time we lived there, it was their worst nightmare. And it wasn't just because the kids were always asking for candy. As a matter of fact, this grocery store was put under investigation because what they discovered was a pattern where the scales that they weighed the fruit, the produce, the meat, upon when they weighed them, they were weighing heavier than reality. They were tipping the scales. They were creating an appearance of one thing in order to extract more money from others. They were deceiving, defrauding, or as Paul speaks of here, deluding. This tipping of the scales, this seeking to lead astray, Paul warns the Colossians about. And what he says to them is that the true riches of the mystery of Christ are what enable us to resist the counterfeit riches of the false arguments of these teachers.

But notice how it was that these teachers were leading them astray. Do you see it there in verse 4? With plausible arguments. Again, this is a word that is only used here once in the New Testament. They are coming with these persuasive, compelling, convincing, and enticing words. It's got the imagery behind it of a lawyer who uses all the power of his rhetoric to create an unjust verdict. That's the type of affect that these teachers were having. And so what were some of the signs of these plausible arguments? Well a plausible argument is something that's close enough to the truth to be deceiving, but far enough from the truth to be destructive. It's compelling, yet it's corrupting. And when Paul speaks here of this reality, he is pulling back the veil on how satan is at work in our lives. He shows us that satan does his best work when his deception is compelling. His best seductions are sensible. And what were some of these seductions that the Colossian church may have faced? Well, what we're going to find later on in this chapter is that these false teachers were sowing seeds of doubt in the church. They were saying, "Yes, Jesus is essential but He's not enough." That you need to add to your religion if you really want to pursue God. And what Paul is showing them in this moment is that if you want to resist these plausible arguments, these deceptions of satan that are the way of death, the way you do that is by standing firm. Resisting them by the power of the gospel. That's one of

the reasons why as a church we are so committed to training you to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ. So whether that's in your life groups that we'll have right after the service or on Wednesday night as we spend the semester, this semester, working through foundations for Christian discipleship. The more you know Jesus, the less likely it is you're to be led astray by these plausible arguments.

See, the Colossians faced those plausible arguments in their day. But what are some of those things that we as a church face today? See because Satan is still at work, pointing us on a way towards death through delusion through deception. It shows up in a variety of ways. Sometimes Satan tempts us to baptize the American dream. Yes, it is appropriate to provide for our families and yet he constantly tries to tempt us to love possessions more than God. Maybe Satan tempts us to baptize America politics. Yes, it is certainly appropriate to influence our government. But, no, we should not be putting our hope in elected officials more than in Jesus Christ. He also seeks to lead us astray by baptizing our desire to embrace American culture. And, yes, we want to have an influence and an impact and to reach the community around us. But our desire is not for the approval of man but the approval of God. There are these plausible arguments that show up even today. And that can clearly be seen when it comes to the conversation we're having about pro-life issues on this Sanctity of Life Sunday. Because one of the things Satan has done in our culture is somehow created the widespread belief that it is reasonable, appropriate, and perhaps even wise to take the life of a baby. I remember in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey down in Houston, it made national headlines that one of the local abortion providers had billboards up calling on women to have an abortion in the aftermath of this natural disaster. And the arguments make sense, doesn't it? The essence of the billboard was to say: You've been through so much. You've lost all of your possessions. You've been dramatically affected by this. You don't want the added hardship of an inconvenient pregnancy. You don't want to put them through that stress. Wouldn't it be easier to just end that and start over again? Or maybe you hear some of these plausible arguments in our day and age where pro-choice people will tell you it's a woman's body. It's her right to choose. That a decision like this should be made between a woman and her doctor. And of course, we want to honor women's bodies. We respect the privacy between a patient and its doctor. All we're saying is, isn't the baby in the womb worth the same respect as well? Don't they have a right over their own body? Don't they deserve the same type of protection? See, at the core of these criticisms about pro-life believers like you and me, is the claim that the truth is we're really just pro-birth, not actually fully pro-life. That all we care is about keeping the baby alive. Not what happens to it after it gets here. And when we hear stories like what happened with Eric Brown and his wife Ruth. The fact that they resisted these plausible arguments from the doctor and instead they chose life. It gives us a different picture. You see, from that moment when they chose to keep the baby, in contrast to their doctor's advice, the road got more difficult. It was a complex pregnancy. They knew that they were walking into uncertainty. And they knew that this would be a difficult time. They induced the baby three weeks early. Pearl arrived at 4 pounds, 3 ounces. And they didn't even know how much time they would get to have with her. But I want you to see the joy of the moment as she was born.

Pearl came out fighting and we decided we would join her in the fight. The whole idea was to always follow Pearl's lead and she came out fighting so we joined her in that fight. When she was born, we were able to see that she had a cleft as well. She was a little bit smaller than the other kids her age. But the main thing was that her brain wasn't

functioning the way that most people's brains do. And so that affected the way that she would move her body. That affected the way that she breathed. It affected everything about her life.

And what a beautiful baby girl. Yes, in the eyes of the world, she's defective. She has that cleft palette, that damaged nose, that brain, the brain problems that would ultimately lead to her death. We can see her defects and yet even in that reality, she reflects the image of God. See the truth is, in a fallen world, every one of us, you and me included, all of us stand before God with our own defects. Some of them may be physical just like that. Ones that you can see. Ones that are obvious. But for every one of us, there are defects within. Spiritually we fall short of God's design for our life. We can't live in a way that is pleasing to Him. We don't find ourselves standing before God in right standing, in wholeness, in perfection, from a spiritual standpoint. And that's exactly why Paul gives us a second reason here as we go on in the text of why we should stand for life. When you look back at verse 5, what you're going to see is that we stand for life by rejoicing in the way of hope. So look back at how he says it there.

<sup>5</sup>For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

So Paul shows us that the way we stand for life is not just by resisting the way of death, but rejoicing in the way of hope. He acknowledges there his physical absence. He says, "I am absent in body." In other words, he was social distancing before it was a thing. But not by choice. It's because he's in prison and he wants to be with these people. But even in his absence, he is writing them. And you can imagine why he is saying this. Think about the way that these false teachers in the midst of the Colossians would take advantage of Paul's absence. If he really loved you, if he really cared about you, if he really knew the truth, don't you think he would be here? How can you trust the guy that you've never met before? We're teaching you the truth. There could be these ways where his absence could sow ambiguity. That his distance could motivate skepticism. But Paul, instead, asserts his spiritual presence. Notice how he says it there.

*I am with you in spirit.*

Even though my physical body is in chains, my gospel to you is unbound. This verse is so fitting during this COVID season. To be absence in body and yet with you in spirit, how many times has that been true for too many of us today? Where the things we would normally do face to face we must do from a distance. Whether that was celebrating Christmas by Zoom because somebody had to quarantine. Or showing up to visit a loved one at their assisted living facility and being unable to go inside and instead having to interact with them through the glass windows. We get this sense of being separated and yet our spirit being together being together as one. But what Paul is doing here is not simply doing the ancient equivalent of saying, "I'm sending you thoughts and prayers." He is saying that his literal, spiritual presence is now with them in his writings. That when this letter comes, it's as if Paul himself is there with them. It comes with this authority, with this affection. He is pouring out his heart for the people. He is demonstrating his presence through his pen. And as he does that, he does it rejoicing in what he finds. He rejoices in the way of hope that he sees in the life of the Colossians. And one of the

reasons for that joy, look back at the text and you're going to see two relative realities. The first one is that Paul rejoices that they are spiritually faithful. Notice how he says it there.

### Rejoicing to see your good order.

Now here in Aggieland we understand what picture he is getting at because later on in the spring semester, all the corps of cadets will muster together one last time for the final review. They'll put on all their uniforms, they'll get in the proper attire, the proper arrangement, the proper form as a outfit and they will be reviewed by the leadership. Now you can imagine the pride, the joy, the pleasure that a commanding officer takes in a band of soldiers who are ready for the battle. Who are properly equipped. Who are properly outfitted. Who are in the proper form. Well this word that Paul is using here when he speaks about good order, in the original language it has a military image. It is a picture of those soldiers who are properly positioned for success on the battlefield. In other words, Paul is telling us this morning that he celebrates the good discipline, the orderly manner, the properly structured reality of the Colossian's faith. Their faithfulness fuels his joy because in it he sees the way of hope, not the way of death. But notice how he goes on there. It's not just their good order that brings him joy. Paul also rejoices that they are spiritually firm. Notice how verse 5 ends.

### In the firmness of your faith in Christ.

This word firmness brings up those images of being strong, stable, steadfast, solid. Again, it was a military concept. But in this case, it wasn't that picture of the unit being ready to go coming into the battle. It was a picture of the performance of the unit during the battle. So if the good order is how it started, then the firmness of faith is how it's going. That when the enemy comes against them, they do not shrink back. They do not retreat. They stand firm. There is a solid foundation in the battle that they face. And I can't help but wonder this morning, Central family, if Paul were here today looking at you and me, would he describe our spiritual lives as faithful and firm? Those are the characteristics that brought him joy. Those are the marks of the way of hope. That's what he celebrates. Is that true for you and me? You know, for some of us, we have a solid start to our faith. But when the trials, the temptations in life come, we begin to fall apart in the middle of the battle. Nothing more than a hot mess. For others of us, we don't always have our act together. But when the difficult times in life come, we always rise to the occasion and somehow make a way through it. But what Paul is showing us here is a picture that he doesn't desire one or the other to either be faithful or firm, but to be both. To be steadfast and stable at the same time. And that would have been so essential for the Colossians. He's calling them to hold the line against these false teachers and he's calling you and me to do the same thing today. If we're being honest, it doesn't always feel like the American church is holding the line in our culture, does it? It feels like we're in retreat, that we're shrinking back, that we are afraid of the battle, that we are running from our enemies, compromising the credibility of our position in the process. And nowhere else is that more of a temptation than when it comes to the life of the unborn. That we could be tempted to look the other way. To focus on the things that are seen rather than that are unseen. But the unborn are counting on us to hold the line, to show that good order, to never lose our voice so that we might continue to stand for life. Now imagine if you could rewind the clock to 1973 and you went to speak to leaders in the prochoice movement and you asked them the question, what will the prolife movement look like in 2021, 48 years after this ruling? They would say, "What prolife movement? We just won. The

prochoice argument just won the day. 48 years from now, there won't be anybody that's resistant to abortion. There won't be anybody that stands against something like this. It will just be absorbed into the fabric of our culture." And yet here we are. And we're not going anywhere. We look at Scripture. We see the plausible arguments around us. But instead of the way of death, we are committing to the way of life. Recognizing that Paul is calling us to stand firm, to show good order in our commitment to resisting all false teachings, including the ones that would trample on the life of the unborn. Could you imagine being Eric and Ruth Brown? I mean, I sure many of you have been in a doctor's office before and received bad news. But to have bad news compounded by bad advice, you just can't even imagine how heartbreaking that must have been. The internal uncertainty and turmoil that they would have wrestled with. Because at the heart of what the doctor was saying is he was raising the question, "Is Pearl worth saving?" Why have her be created if she can't be redeemed? Why bring her into this life if she can't have a chance to make it? And what they declared instead is she was worth saving physically. And what this text is reminding us of this morning is that some of you may have this nagging voice in your head wondering if that same reality is true of you spiritually. Are you too far gone? Are your sins too great? Are your failures too deep? And what the gospel reminds us of is that none of us are too dirty to be washed white as snow. None of us are too broken that we can't be made new. None of us are so far from God that we can't be brought near. And no matter where you find yourself this morning; whether feeling firm and faithful or feeble and faithless, Jesus is inviting you into God's family. And speaking of family, when Eric and Ruth welcomed Pearl into their family, they didn't know how long they'd have with her. Only 3% of kids even make it to their birth with this disease. And many of them die soon after. They wanted to make the most of that time even though they knew it would be limited in duration. They knew it would be limited in experience. They knew the way her disease would affect her. She couldn't see. She couldn't hear. She couldn't speak. And yet in God's kindness, Pearl defied the odds and lived until beyond age 5. 5 incredible years with that precious girl. But they knew one day death was coming. The way I heard Eric say it one time is that her best day would be our worst. That day when she passed away. And that day finally came not long ago right before Easter. And this sense of loss in that season where we are longing for the future, it is a reminder to us that when the dark moments come, when the cold realities of loss occur, that God, through His church, is there to meet us in our weakness.

As we close out our time and this message this morning, I want you to see what happened next with this family and how they reflected on it.

Some days the hardest part is just her not being here. Some days the hardest part is, yeah, wanting to be close to her body and to spend time physically with her. I do have joy in the Lord, but I probably look a little bit less happy most days. And that's an OK difference. Within the community of people saying, "choose life", for kids like Pearl, for children with special needs and poor prenatal diagnoses, I feel like within that community we are very, very, very equipped at how to choose life and how to say, yes. How to advocate for life. How to support. But if we're going to advocate that children like her be carried to term, we've got to know that these children oftentimes are not long for this world. And so I could be wrong, but I think we need to be equally as invigorated with learning how and helping each other know how to say goodbye to these children.

To know how to say “goodbye” to these children. Eric calls us to be the kind of church that doesn’t just fight for life, but fights for families that are going through loss. You can imagine the dark night of the soul that affected both of them after Peal left this world. And yet even in their darkest moments, the light of the gospel met them in their deepest darkness. You see, the reality is that Pearl Brown never spoke a word, but her life speaks volumes to us this morning, Central family. About the reality of how everyone is made in the image of God. About how all of us are to resist the delusions, the plausible arguments, that would tell us that life can be discarded as if it has no value. And to remind us of this reality, that we are called to stand firm in the midst of hardship. Firm and faithful. Stable and steadfast as we stand for life.

Let’s pray together.

Father, we’re coming to you on behalf of the unborn this morning, God, pleading with You for their cause. Asking for You to rescue and to deliver. To spare them from this physical loss of life. And, Father, as we do that, we’re coming to You this morning knowing that there are people in this room that are carrying the weight of sin, the burden of shame, who feel a sense of spiritual death in their life. And I pray in this moment, God, that You would bring them to newness of life. That You would rescue them from sin. That You would set them free so that all of us as we seek to be faithful members of Your family will be the type of people, the type of church, the type of community that Paul celebrates here. One that is stable and steadfast in our faith because You are working through Your Spirit to make us more like Jesus and we ask these things in Christ’s name. Amen.