

I. Introduction

- A. When I was a young pastor in Chicago, I needed a family doctor. So asked around.
- B. A friend recommended his doc — a University of Chicago Medical School MD. Excellent credentials. He also followed natural medicine. Good combination. I made the appointment.
- C. He turned out to be an excellent physician. I trusted him.
- D. Then my friend told me about something else.
- E. One day my friend was on the exam table, and the doctor wanted to check him for mineral deficiencies.
- F. He had a cabinet with about twenty vials — each one containing a different mineral. Copper. Magnesium. Potassium. Iron.
- G. He hand my friend lie down on the exam table. Then the doctor took the vial of copper and passed it slowly over my friend's body.
- H. He said he was checking the vibrational field of the copper against the vibrational field of my friend's aura.
- I. That was his diagnostic technique. He worked through all the vials.
- J. On my next visit, I noticed reading material in the lobby from an organization called the Theosophical Institute.
- K. I had driven past their headquarters in the western suburbs. An imposing facility. Victorian. Gigantic. An eerie looking Gothic building makes you slow down when you drive by and wonder what goes on inside.
- L. I did some research on Theosophy. The lights came on. I changed doctors.
- M. That doctor was not a fool. He was a University of Chicago MD. He had credentials. But he was operating inside a complete worldview — a sophisticated, organized, ancient system of religious thought that has been infiltrating Western culture for centuries.
- N. Today I want to show you where that system comes from. And what Paul said is behind it.

II. Series Introduction

- A. Welcome to Pathway and to our summer series of talks. The series is called: **What's the Difference?**
- B. This is a tour of the major belief systems of the world with one question running through every talk: What does Jesus do that nothing else can do? Today's topic is **Mystery Religions**.
- C. The mystery religions were a collection of secret initiation cults that flourished across Greece and Rome during the centuries surrounding the birth of Jesus. Each one promised hidden knowledge, an experience of God, and a guaranteed path to a better afterlife — through ritual, secrecy, initiation fees, and ecstasy.
 - 1. Here is a beginning list:
 - a) 1. The Eleusinian Mysteries
 - b) 2. The Dionysian Mysteries
 - c) 3. The Orphic Mysteries
 - d) 4. Mithraism
 - e) 5. The Isis and Osiris Cult
 - f) 6. The Cybele and Attis Cult
 - g) 7. The Sabazios Cult
 - h) 8. The Samothracian Mysteries
 - i) 9. Hermeticism
 - j) 10. Gnosticism
 - k) 11. The Adonis Mysteries
 - l) 12. The Pythagorean Mysteries
 - 2. Each one offered salvation in a competitive marketplace of ideas.
 - 3. Each one aimed at the exact same longings the human heart carries today. Before I show you what Paul said about them — you need to know what these mystery religions actually looked like.
 - 4. Here's a sample:
- D. WHAT THESE RITES ACTUALLY LOOKED LIKE
 - 1. THE DIONYSIAN MYSTERIES
 - a) Dionysius was the god of wine, ecstasy, and divine madness. His female devotees were called *maenads* — the raving ones. In the spring they left their homes and went into the mountains. They drank wine to excess. They danced to drums and cymbals until they lost themselves entirely.
 - b) That was the point. The religious goal was *ekstasis* — standing outside yourself — so that the god could come in.
 - c) In that state, they performed a rite called *sparagmos* — tearing a living animal apart with their bare hands — and then *omophagia* — eating the raw flesh. By consuming the raw life force of the animal, you were consuming its divine spark.
 - d) In 186 BC the Roman Senate launched an investigation into the Dionysian cults. What they found horrified them: secrecy, sexual chaos, violence, accusations of human sacrifice. They outlawed the cult. It kept growing anyway.
 - 2. THE CYBELE AND ATTIS CULT
 - a) Cybele was the Great Mother — the Phrygian goddess whose cult swept across Rome. Her priests were called the Galli. On the annual Day of Blood — March 24 — they worked themselves into a frenzy through drums and instruments.
 - b) In that frenzied state, some castrated themselves as an act of devotion. New initiates slashed their arms. Blood ran freely.
 - c) For the lay initiate, the central rite was the *taurobolium*.
 - d) The initiate descended into a pit. A bull was killed on a platform above them. Its blood rained down through the gaps — onto the people below, who stood there, drunk, high, frenzied, and drenched in blood.
 - e) Carved into the stone near the pit were the words: *renatus in aeternum*. Reborn for eternity. Under the blood of a bull.
 - f) The ancient world knew something modern people try to forget. Sin demands blood. Guilt demands cleansing. Death demands an answer.
 - g) They were trusting the wrong blood in the wrong way.
 - 3. MITHRAISM
 - a) Then there was Mithraism — one of the most important mystery religions in the Roman world. It was especially popular among soldiers and merchants.
 - b) More than four hundred Mithraic temples have been discovered across the Roman world — from Britain to Syria, from Germany to North Africa. Paul's world was saturated with it.
 - c) The Mithraic temple was always underground, dark and small.
 - (1) Long benches ran along the walls for the sacred meal.

- (2) At the far end of each was the central image: Mithras slaying the bull. His blood flowing downward. Life coming from death.
- d) Mithraism had seven grades of initiation — each connected to one of the seven planetary powers.
- e) Ancient people believed those seven planets were spheres of spiritual power, not merely objects in the sky. When a person died, the soul had to ascend through all seven.
- f) But each sphere had a gatekeeper requiring the correct secret password to pass through. Only initiates learned the passwords.
4. MY COLLEGE STORY
 - a) In my second year of college at the University of Illinois, I took a course in Greek & Roman Civilization. For the entire semester, the professor kept hammering the same claim: Christianity was basically a repackaging of Mithraism.
 - (1) Jesus was Mithras with new branding.
 - (2) The Lord's Supper was copied from the Mithraic meal.
 - (3) The resurrection was just another ancient death-and-rebirth myth.
 - b) I was a Christian. I was twenty years old. And I did not yet have all the answers. Now I do.
 - (1) Christianity is not a repackaging of Mithraism. Christianity is the public execution of Mithraism's entire religious system.
 - (2) Mithraism says salvation is hidden. The Gospel says salvation has appeared.
 - (3) Mithraism says you climb through the planetary powers. The Gospel says Christ disarmed the powers at the cross.
 - (4) Mithraism says you need passwords after death. The Gospel says whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.
 - (5) Mithraism says you need the blood of the bull. The Gospel says: Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
 - c) That professor thought Mithraism explained Christianity. He had it exactly backwards. Mithraism offers a prison. Christ offers the rescue.
5. We are just scratching the surface. Into this mess came St Paul, the missionary for Jesus.
6. PAUL'S ASSESSMENT
 - a) *"Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles [stoicheia] of the world, and not according to Christ."* (Colossians 2:8)
 - b) I want to underline the term: the basic principles of the world. The Greek word is *stoicheia*.
 - c) Paul uses *stoicheia* several times.
 - (1) Galatians 4:3 — *"Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements [stoicheia] of the world."*
 - (2) Galatians 4:9 — *"how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements [stoicheia], to which you desire again to be in bondage?"*
 - d) Clinton Arnold is a New Testament professor at Biola who spent years reading Paul alongside the Greek Magical Papyri — actual magical and religious texts from the world Paul's churches inhabited.
 - (1) His conclusion: when Paul writes *stoicheia*, his readers understood the cosmic powers behind the stars, behind the elements, behind the religious systems that organized their lives.
 - (a) *Stoicheia* were the powers behind the mystery religions, which for the early church meant demons.
 - (b) *Stoicheia* = Demons
 - e) Paul's readers were not hearing an abstract philosophical category. They were hearing the names of beings they had once feared, paid, and obeyed.
 - f) And then Paul gives his verdict on those beings.
 - (1) "The weak and beggarly elements." (Galatians 4:9)
 - (2) Feeble. Bankrupt.
 - g) The beings behind the maenads, the Galli, the initiate in the pit, the Mithraic grades and passwords were demonic.
 - h) They cannot save. They cannot cleanse. They cannot forgive sin or raise the dead. They cannot give what they advertise.
 - i) But they are not myths. They are real. And they do not die.
7. The mystery religions did not die. They changed their vocabulary for the modern world.
 - a) **Demons don't die. They rebrand.**
8. They usually rebrand in two directions — respectability and ecstasy. The respectable door is Theosophy. The ecstatic door is Burning Man. Different doorway. Same ladder.
 - a) **LINK:** I do a lot of research when I prep for a sermon, and this week I want to give you my background research. It's here at this below. 55 pages of material, and it's honestly disturbing.
<https://alpha-christians.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/Mystery+Religions+of+the+Greco-Roman+World+&+Today.pdf>

III. THESE SAME DEMONS ARE ALIVE TODAY

A. THEOSOPHY: THE RESPECTABLE DOOR

1. My Chicago doctor did not need a mountain ritual or a pit and a bull. He found the same system through a cabinet of mineral vials and Theosophical literature in his waiting room.
2. Theosophy was popularized through Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian occultist who co-founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875. Her major work was a best seller called *The Secret Doctrine*... which had an ancient symbol on its cover later used by the Nazi's.
3. It says all religions are different expressions of the same ancient wisdom.
 - a) The problem is not guilt before a holy God. The problem is ignorance.
 - b) Salvation is not atonement. Salvation is awakening.
 - c) You do not need a Savior. You need to awaken to the divine spark within yourself.
4. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky argued that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was not the villain.
 - a) He was the liberator.
 - b) He brought knowledge. He gave humanity the secret God was supposedly withholding. His promise in Genesis 3:5 — "You will be like God" — is the theological DNA of Theosophy, of Gnosticism, and of every modern spirituality that says your real problem is forgetting who you are.
5. Theosophy seeded the New Age movement. It shaped the language of ascended masters, karma, reincarnation, auras, chakras, energy medicine, and the modern wellness industry.
6. That is why someone can say "I am spiritual but not religious" and think they have said something modern. They have not. They have said something ancient. Different language. Same serpent.

7. The Theosophical Society in America is headquartered in Wheaton, Illinois — the western suburbs of Chicago. That building I drove past. The literature in my doctor's lobby. He was a smart man reaching toward the divine. He just did not know that was reaching backwards to a very dark past.
 8. This is Mystery Religion passing through the Respectable Door.
 - a) What about the Ecstatic Door?
 - B. BURNING MAN: THE ECSTATIC DOOR
 1. Every August, tens of thousands of people gather in the Nevada desert for Burning Man.
 2. Larry Harvey did not build it as a Theosophical event. But the spiritual water table underneath it is the same water table that runs through Theosophy, the New Age movement, and the ancient mystery religions.
 - a) It is built around direct experience beyond doctrine.
 - b) Radical self-expression.
 - c) Altered states.
 - d) Ritual space. Symbolic destruction.
 - e) And the burning of a giant effigy.
 3. The mechanism is ancient. The maenads used wine. Other rites used music, drums, sexuality, frenzy, and exhaustion.
 4. The mechanism was always the same: overwhelm the rational will with sensation until the ordinary defenses collapse. And when those defenses collapse, another power enters.
 - a) The will is the guardian of your soul; when you let down your guard, the demons come in.
 5. Burning Man modernized it and called it a wild good time. The spiritual architecture is not new.
 - C. THE BROADER CULTURE
 1. The same ancient symbolic vocabulary now powerfully influences arts, entertainment, wellness, academia, government, and self-help culture: serpents, eyes, hidden knowledge, initiation, awakening, the higher self, Satan-shoes (a limited edition of 666 pairs sold out in a minute), avatars, Jungianism, shadow work, secret societies.
 2. Not every practitioner knows what they are handling.
 - a) Some of the occult references are for shock value.
 - b) Some are to boost sales.
 - c) Some are for artistic expression.
 - d) Some are intentionally satanic.
 3. As a pastor all I can say is do not mess around with satanic or demonic imagery, music, art, or practices.
 - a) Never give a permission slip to the dark side.
 - b) And even though when it comes to salvation it is feeble and bankrupt, the demonic realm is still recruiting. Still lying. Still unable to save.
 - D. This is the world where the early Christians brought the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- IV. WHAT PAUL SAYS IS BEHIND THE CURTAIN
- A. FIRST WITNESS: 1 CORINTHIANS 10:20
 1. Paul writes to Christians still attending mystery religion banquets.
 - a) He says: *"the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons."* (1 Corinthians 10:20-21)
 2. Notice what Paul does not say. He does not say those rituals accomplish nothing.
 3. When a pagan worshiper stood before an altar in Corinth, burning fat and pouring out wine to Apollo, they thought they were honoring a beautiful, sun-crowned deity. Paul pulls back the spiritual curtain: Apollo doesn't exist, but a real, malicious, fallen angelic power is gladly intercepting that worship.
 4. The mystery religion meal establishes genuine fellowship (an emotional/spiritual bond) with the demons animating the cult.
 - B. SECOND WITNESS: ACTS 16:16-18
 1. *"Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination [Gk=python] met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling."* (Acts 16:16)
 2. In Philippi, a slave girl with a *"pneuma pythonos"* follows Paul for several days calling out accurate information about him.
 3. She is demon possessed with the same demons behind the oracle of Delphi. She is exploited to make money.
 4. This is one of the most important moments in Acts.
 - a) Truth-content does not validate the spiritual source.
 - b) When someone tells you their spirit guide gave them real guidance, that the tarot reading came true, that the channeled entity knew things nobody else could know — that is not the test. The test is: what spirit? Who is behind it?
 - C. THIRD WITNESS: 1 JOHN 4:1-3
 1. John gives you the test.
 - a) *"Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God."* (1 John 4:2-3)
 2. Apply it to the major channeled entities in contemporary New Age culture. Abraham, channeled by Esther Hicks. Seth, channeled by Jane Roberts. The inner Jesus of A Course in Miracles — who says explicitly: a body cannot be crucified.
 3. Every single one fails the test. Without exception. This is not coincidence. It is the diagnostic marker John identified two thousand years ago.
 - D. FOURTH WITNESS: EPHESIANS 6:12
 1. *"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."* (Ephesians 6:12)
 2. The word *kosmokratoras* — rulers of the darkness of this age — appears in the Greek Magical Papyri as the technical term for the planetary beings the mystery religion magic claimed to name and control. Paul is using the exact vocabulary of demons.
 3. That's who we wrestle against.
 - E. FIFTH WITNESS: 1 TIMOTHY 4:1
 1. *"The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons."* (1 Timothy 4:1)

2. Not wrong ideas. Doctrines. Organized, systematized teachings with a demonic point of origin. The New Age framework that sin is an illusion, that awakening replaces atonement — these are not philosophical errors. They are teachings with an author.
 3. The Chicago doctor was not just following a wellness philosophy. He was operating inside a doctrine — ancient, organized, and demonically sourced.
- V. THE GOSPEL COUNTER-OFFER
- A. They just had the wrong blood. So what is the right blood?
 1. *"For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power."* (Colossians 2:9-10)
 - B. The word fullness — *pleroma* — was the mystery religion's word for the divine totality.
 - C. They sold access to fragments of it, one initiation at a time, one grade at a time. Paul says the entire fullness of God dwells bodily in Christ.
 - D. And he is the head of all principality and power... the demons tremble before him. They fear him, because he has guaranteed their doom.
 - E. You are complete in Him Christian.
 1. Right now. Already.
 2. You are enough. You are ready. You are able. You are capable. You lack nothing. You are complete.
 3. Quit chasing what he's already declared you to be.
- VI. The Prodigal Son
- A. Here is how I test every worldview in this series.
 - B. How does your tradition end the story of the Prodigal Son?
 - C. In the mystery religion version, the son would need an initiation ritual to come home to the Father.
 1. One would have to get past the *stoicheia* to come back into unity, and the initiation bill is huge..
 - D. But, in the biblical version — there is a father.
 1. And when he sees his son a great way off — he runs so his son does not have to walk the full length of that road in shame.
 2. The mystery religions asked how to get to God. The Gospel answers: God got to you. Not human ascent. His cross.
- VII. THE DIFFERENCE IS GRACE
- A. The ancient world was not naive; it was desperate. Desperate to be clean. Desperate to touch the divine.
 - B. My Chicago doctor was exactly the same. He was a good man reaching for something real in the dark. He just didn't realize that what he was reaching for had already come to find him.
 - C. Every mystery religion is built on that human desperation. But Paul calls them weak and bankrupt. Not because the spiritual realm isn't real. It is real.
 - D. But demons don't die—they just rebrand. They keep selling the exact same lie: Ascend. Reach. Awaken. Climb. Perform.
 1. They demand a price you can never pay.
 2. They demand the blood of a bull.
 3. They demand you find a way to reach God.
 4. And if they can, they demand you pay with your own life.
 - a) Demons don't die. They just rebrand, so stay alert.
 - E. Because grace did and grace does what no religion ever promised and no *stoicheia* ever delivered.
 - F. The Gospel of Grace has a completely different answer.
 - G. The Gospel announces, the price is already paid.
 1. In fact it's paid in full.
 - a) So Jesus says, "Come to me." I came for you. I died for you. I love you. Come to me.
 - (1) Not to an initiation, but to His finished work.
 - b) Come to me once, Jesus says, and I will save you once for all.
 - H. Demons rebrand. But grace never needs to. Grace is forever unearned. Forever unmerited. And forever undefeated.
 - I. God didn't wait for you to reach Him. God reached you. That is the difference.
 - J. I say, Hallelujah, the difference is grace.

Pastor Bill's Resource Pack for this Sermon

<https://alpha-christians.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/Mystery+Religions+of+the+Greco-Roman+World+&+Today.pdf>