

NT Survey – Colossians
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School
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Title, Date of Writing, and Author

Colossians is addressed to the church in the city of Colossae and is the third of four letters labeled "The Prison Epistles" since they were written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome AD 60-62. The other three were Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon and all four make reference to his plight (Eph 3:1; Phil 1:7; Col 4:10; Philemon 1:9). It was most likely written about the same time as Ephesians and Philemon which places it around AD 60-61.

The letter claims to be written by the Apostle Paul and the testimony of the early church confirms this. As far as we know Paul had never been to Colossae (2:1), but his friend and coworker Epaphras reported on the condition of the church, both its abounding love for God and other saints (1:7) and doctrinal problems. Epaphras was so concerned about the problems at Colossae that he made the 1000-1300 mile trip to Rome to consult with Paul.

Epaphras stayed in Rome to minister with/to Paul. The letter was sent back to Colossae with Tychicus (4:7). Tychicus also carried Ephesians (Eph 6:21) and traveled with Onesimus (4:7-9) as he traveled back to his master Philemon with a letter from Paul. The church at Colossae met in Philemon's house (Philemon 2). Colossians was intended for reading at a neighboring church at Laodicea as well (4:16)

Introduction

Colossae was a has-been city in Phrygia, along the Lycus River, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It lay in the Roman province of Asia Minor in what is now South Central Turkey and in the area of the 7 churches mentioned in Revelation 1-3. In Paul's time, Colossae was a small city with a mixed population of Phyrrians, Greeks, and Jews. Its Jewish settlement dated back to Antiochus the Great in 223-187 BC.

The gospel was probably taken to Colossae when Paul spent three years in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19). It was Epaphras who was the key worker in the evangelism and growth of the Colossians. He was apparently saved during a visit to Ephesus and then started the church when he returned home to Colossae (1:5-7). Epaphras made the long journey to Rome to visit Paul in prison and tell him of a dangerous heresy that was threatening the young church. He was imprisoned with Paul at that time or later perhaps (Philemon 23). Paul wrote to address these theological problems and also wrote a letter to the church about the slave-convert, Onesimus.

This heresy combined ideas from various religions and philosophies with the truth of Christianity. The sources seem to be Roman paganism, legalistic Judaism, Greek philosophies, and ancient mystery religions. The resulting heresy later became known as Gnosticism, emphasizing a special knowledge (gnosis), and denying the deity and saving work of Jesus. It became a major thorn in the side of the early church and is revisited in many letters.

Paul deals with these philosophies by presenting Jesus and the Scriptures as completely sufficient for all our spiritual needs. The theme of Colossians then is the supremacy and all sufficiency of Christ

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is not easy to define because it is a collection of features from several movements and belief systems. The term itself is derived from the Greek word for knowledge (gnosis). Gnostics believed that matter is evil and spirit is good. Therefore, they invented heretical views on how Christ could be God, yet take on human flesh. They taught that there is a spark of divinity within human beings, and that the essence of spirituality is nurturing this immaterial side and denying material and physical urges. The chief means of releasing the divine element within a person was through attaining intellectual and spiritual enlightenment.

Gnostics believed they were privy to a higher level of spiritual knowledge than the average believer had access to, and this realm of knowledge (gnosis in Greek) was the key to spiritual illumination. This caused many to seek hidden knowledge beyond the Scriptures and Christ. Gnosticism was a very elite, exclusive movement that disdained “unenlightened” and “simplistic” biblical Christians.

Present-day Gnostic-like Tendencies

Psychology Movement – Believes that other knowledge, apart from or in addition to Christ and the Word, is needed in order to meet people’s deepest soul needs. It is not enough to point Christians to their soul’s full sufficiency in Christ and His Word. Counseling from the Scriptures is widely viewed as unsophisticated, naive, and even hurtful.

Pragmatism Movement – Believes that the end justifies the means. There is a secret knowledge of how to do ministry apart from the principles in the Scriptures. The church can accomplish spiritual goals by fleshly means, and that God’s Word and the Holy Spirit alone are not sufficient to break through the sinner’s blindness and hardness of heart.

Mysticism Movement – Believes that spiritual reality is perceived apart from the intellect and natural senses. Extra-biblical “revelation”, individual feelings, and personal experience replaces sound biblical interpretation.

Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1-14)
 - A. Greeting (1:1-2)
 - B. Thankfulness and prayer (1:3-12)
- II. Doctrine (1:13-2:23)
 - A. The Person and work of Christ (1:15-23)
 - C. Paul’s ministry (1:24-2:7)
 - D. The sufficiency of Christ versus worldly philosophies (2:8-23)
- III. Practical Exhortations (3:1-4:18)
 - A. Conduct (3:1-17)
 - B. Households (3:18-4:1)
 - C. Speech (4:2-6)
- IV. Conclusion (4:7-18)

Summary

Introduction (1:1-12)

1:1-2 – Greeting – Paul begins with a salutation indicating his authorship and the intended audience for the letter. This greeting is almost identical the greeting in Ephesians (Colossians’ sister letter). Paul is an apostle “by the will of God”. Paul had not visited the church at Colossae at the time of this writing and was writing to address false teaching, so he directs the readers to the reason he is an apostle. Paul identifies his audience as saints – those set apart from sin unto Himself and declared holy through their faith in His Son Jesus. When Paul addresses the saints, he is not separating some Christians from others in the Colossian church. He further describes them as the faithful in Christ Jesus. The phrase faithful brethren may refer to those who have not embraced the false teaching that concerned Paul. Saints are new creatures in Christ and therefore a natural behavior is that they are faithful. “Grace and peace” is a standard greeting in all of Paul’s letters.

❖ **Am I faithful?**

1:3-12 – Thankfulness and Prayer – Paul and Timothy (“we”) gave thanks for God’s work in the Colossians’ lives. The Colossians are people of faith, love, and hope. God brought them into a relationship with Himself by bringing the word of truth, the gospel, to them. It is evident they are saved because they are bearing fruit and increasing. Paul and Timothy unceasingly pray for them:

“⁹...be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” Col 1:9-12

❖ **Is this how I pray for people in my life?**

Paul's prayer is his first attack against the false teachers. They promised a special knowledge and superior spirituality. Terms like filled, knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual understanding were part of their vocabulary. So he uses these same words in his prayer. He asks that God "fill" them with "the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v 9). The term "filled" is a key word in Colossians. Paul uses it here and throughout the letter and it carries the idea of being fully equipped or controlled. Paul's prayer was that the people be controlled by the full knowledge of God's will, which would lead to obedience and moral excellence.

❖ **Do I have any Gnostic-like tendencies (extra-biblical self-help; pragmatism; mysticism)?**

Doctrine (1:13-2:23)

1:13-19 – Character and Position – Paul continues his thoughts of prayer with talking about what Christ has done and who He is. We have been rescued from the domain of darkness; transferred (resettled) to the kingdom of the Son; redeemed (release brought about by the payment of a price); and forgiven (God has forgiven the penalty of eternal damnation for our sins through faith in Jesus). These should motivate us to want to grow and cultivate our relationship with God even more; that we may live a life worthy of the Lord to please Him in all respects.

Paul wants to make it clear that Jesus is not something made up in the Gnostic beliefs. He is God and head over all creation. He is creator and sustainer. He is head of the church; the one crucified and resurrected. He is fully God. God's intention was that Jesus have the preeminence and be worshipped because He is God.

❖ **Does Christ have first place my heart?**

1:20-23 – Reconciled – Through Christ, God reconciled “all things” to Himself. Through Jesus' physical death (His fleshly body) we have been brought from being "alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, to “peace and unity, "reconciled", to God. This is true in us if we persevere. Perseverance is the demonstration that we are truly saved.

❖ **Am I persevering?**

1:23-2:7 – Paul’s Ministry – Paul has been made a minister of the gospel. He rejoices in suffering that he was able to take upon himself the hatred of unbelievers toward Christ for the sake of the church. Ministry is a stewardship for which we must be found faithful. Ministry’s benefit is for other people not ourselves.

Paul’s ministry statement: “²⁸We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. ²⁹For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.”

Paul strove to present every person complete in Christ, even those who he had not met. Here he explains that purpose in terms that a Gnostic would understand was opposite to their belief. His efforts were intended to help the church know the meaning of, "God's mystery, that is Christ Himself" (v2). A mystery is something once hidden that is now revealed. The mystery here is that Jews and Gentiles are fellow members of the body of Christ, not through secret knowledge, tradition, ritual, or life-style, but through the blood of Jesus alone. This knowledge will assure that, "no one may delude you with persuasive arguments" (v4).

If they have received Christ, Paul exhorts them to WALK in Him. The best way to avoid error is to "walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built upon Him and established in your faith" (v7).

❖ **What is my ministry statement? Am I walking in Him?**

2:8-15 – Christ's Sufficiency over Philosophy – Again, the real threat of the false teachers at Colossae was their man-made doctrine that denied the deity of Jesus. We are exhorted to not be taken "captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." The antidote for any false teaching is to be immersed in true teaching. And the truth is that, "in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete." We do not need to be looking to empty philosophy. We need to be surrendered to Christ and His word.

Paul's mention of being complete in Christ moves him to recap some of the things that Christ has done for us: death to sin; buried in baptism; raised and made alive in Him; forgiveness when we were dead in sins; cancelling of sin debt; and victory through Jesus.

❖ **Have I been taken captive through philosophy and empty deception?**

2:16-17 – Christ's Sufficiency over Legalism – Since all these things are true concerning who Jesus is and what He has done for us, the we are not to be subject to any form of legalism. The following of the law or any system of rules or traditions has no merit or value toward our salvation. Salvation is by faith in Jesus, who alone is sufficient to meet every spiritual need. All these legal restrictions under the old covenant were shadows or only foreshadowing of the real "substance" in Christ.

❖ **Am I a practicing legalist?**

2:18-19 – Christ's Sufficiency over Mysticism – A Christian needs to shun, "delighting in self abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen," (v18). Spiritual experience can be misguided or even artificial, from our "fleshly mind" (v18). The answer to this danger is to hold fast to Jesus and function in the body. This is the source of the "growth which comes from God" (v19).

❖ **Do I live based on mystical experiences or on God's word?**

2:20-23 – Christ's Sufficiency over Asceticism – Many still believe that we are more spiritual if we abstain from certain activities, certain foods, or certain objects. Paul points out four weaknesses in asceticism:

1. It is not Biblical. Good things are for us to enjoy (2:22).
2. It has no relation to the eternal (2:22).
3. It can lead to pride (2:23).
4. It does not curb earthly desires (2:23).

❖ **How am I striving to progress in sanctification?**

Practical Exhortations (3:1-4:18)

3:1-17 – Conduct – Rather than being captive to philosophy, or legalism, or mysticism, or asceticism, we are captive to Christ. We have been raised up with Christ; we are identified with Him by grace through faith. So we are to keep seeking the things above; set our minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For we have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

❖ **Am I seeking the things above?**

Since we are made new and bound for glory we should consider our members dead to: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech. Do not lie to our brothers and sisters and pretend to have put this sins away, but instead are holding on to them. Instead know that the new self is one being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created us (v10). This renewal brings a new group together in Christ.

❖ **Am I actively putting off sin?**

The put ons related to the body of Christ: a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

❖ **Am I actively putting on righteousness?**

Those that have been made new should have Christ’s peace ruling their hearts.

❖ **Am I peaceful or anxious?**

Those that are in Christ are exhorted to be filled with the Spirit (let the word of Christ richly dwell within them). Being filled with the Spirit is equivalent to letting the word of Christ richly dwell within you (Col 3:16) and likewise produces Christ-like words, worship, reactions, and relationships (Eph 5:18-6:9 and Col 3:16-22 c.f. Gal 5:22-23).

	Ephesians 5:18-21	Colossians 3:16-4:1
Command	And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit	Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you
Words	speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs	with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms <i>and</i> hymns <i>and</i> spiritual songs
Worship	singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord	singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God
Reactions	always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father	Whatever you do in word or deed, <i>do</i> all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.
Relationships	and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ... (Wives..., Husbands..., Children..., Fathers..., Slaves..., Masters...)	Wives..., Husbands..., Children..., Fathers..., Slaves..., Masters...

Letting the words of Christ richly dwell within us (being filled with the Spirit) is the surrendering of every area of our life to God so that the word of God (the Holy Spirit) is controlling our:

Words – “with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs”

Worship – “singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God”

Reactions – “Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”

Relationships – “and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ... (Wives..., Husbands..., Children..., Fathers..., Slaves..., Masters...)”

❖ **Am I living filled with the Spirit?**

3:18-4:1 – Households – Paul gives the Spirit filled results in family relationships.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.

Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

❖ **Am I working out righteousness in my family relationships?**

Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who *merely* please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

❖ **Am I working out righteousness in my work relationships?**

4:2-6 – Speech – Paul focuses on two area of speech: prayer and witnessing.

1. Prayer – Paul has given the exhortation to be devoted to prayer before (Rom 12:12). The Colossians are to give prayer constant attention and priority. They must be alert and not lose concentration. They must also be alert for things to pray for – turning thoughts into prayer. They must also be grateful in prayer for all the blessings we have in Christ and God’s work in people’s lives.
2. Witnessing – Paul makes it clear that sharing the gospel begins with prayer. He asks for people to pray for him to have opportunity, to seize the opportunity, and to speak clearly.

❖ **How is my speech? Am I communing with God in prayer? Am I sharing the gospel?**

Paul goes on to describe how believers should conduct themselves toward unbelievers:

⁵Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. ⁶Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

❖ **Is my speech seasoned with salt?**

Conclusion (4:7-18)

The conclusion of this letter is an object lesson of the way a life committed to Jesus and God's Word has an effect on the body. It is a list of people whose lives Paul affected, and in turn, life that impacted he and his ministry as well.

⁷...Tychicus, *our* beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, ...

⁹...Onesimus, *our* faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your *number*. ...

Onesimus had been a slave in the household of Philemon and a member of the Colossian church, had run away to Rome, and Paul had led him to Christ there. Paul sent him back to Colossae with Tychicus, not in chains but as a beloved brother in Christ who had proved himself faithful.

¹⁰Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and *also* Barnabas’s cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him); ¹¹and *also* Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me.

¹²Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

¹⁴Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and *also* Demas.

¹⁵Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house.

¹⁷Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

Paul normally used a secretary to write his letters and then added a personal word at the end in his own handwriting to authenticate his authorship (Rom 16:22; Gal 6:11).

❖ **Am I impacting other believers; are they impacting me?**

Homework

Read 1 Thessalonians.