

Study in Colossians

Session 1

As with any thorough study of any book of the Bible, it is important to understand the history and culture of the book in question. By knowing the background of the letter, it places us in a better position to get the most out of our study and understand the nuances of Paul's letter.

Colossae was a small town located on the south bank of the Lycus River in the interior of Asia Minor. It was about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It's nearest neighbors were Laodicea (about ten miles away) and Hierapolis (about thirteen miles away). Both of these cities were more important than Colossae. In centuries past, Colossae was very large, prosperous and important. Yet over time, the trade routes shifted and by the time Paul wrote this letter Colossae was nothing more than an insignificant market town. When compared to all the cities to which Paul wrote, Colossae was by far the least important city on that list.

We have no record of the formation of the Colossian church and it isn't even mentioned in Acts. All we know about this church is found in this brief letter and its companion letter, Philemon.

This letter was written by Paul during one of his imprisonments, though we aren't sure which imprisonment, the best thoughts are from Rome. It appears that Colossians and Ephesians were written at pretty much the same time, with Colossians coming slightly before Ephesians, probably - somewhere around 62 A.D.

Why was this letter written? What was its occasion? We are told in Colossians 1:8 that Epaphras, Paul faithful co-laborer, arrived in Rome with the disturbing news that heretical teaching was threatening the well-being of the church there. While the letter gives no direct account of this heretical teaching yet it is possible to sketch together the issues which were not orthodox. **1)** It professed to be a philosophy but Paul refused to recognize it as genuine and called it "empty deception" (2:8) and believed that it could have been some dabbling in the occult. **2)** It placed a great deal of importance on several of the ceremonial rituals of Judaism such as circumcision, dietary laws, and observance of holy days (2:11, 14, 16, 17). **3)** It affirmed the mediation of various supernatural powers in creation of the world and the process of salvation. This false teaching insisted that these mysterious powers be pacified and worshiped (2:15, 18, 19). As a result, Christ was relegated to a minor role in the Colossian heresy. **4)** Some of the heretical teachers were ascetics (2:20-23). They taught that the body (matter) was evil and had to be treated as an enemy. **5)** The advocates of this teaching claimed to be Christian teachers (2:3-10).

From all of this we can conclude that the Colossian heresy was syncretistic, combining the elements of many faiths and philosophies into one new false faith. This teaching had at least three elements to it: **1)** Insistence upon legalism and ritualism and this points to a Jewish element. However, it isn't the Judaizer element that Paul had refuted and been persecuted by in other locations, such as Galatia. **2)** This false teaching also had a pagan element to it due to its philosophical nature and teaching of angelolatry (worship of angels). This was what is called proto-Gnosticism. Much of this false teaching deals with seminal ideas of what later becomes Gnosticism. (Gnosticism took eastern myths and Greek philosophy and then absorbed other native religions. It claimed that only the enlightened could know it as it was founded on 'secret or mysterious' knowledge. The base teaching of Gnosticism was that all matter was evil, there were supernatural, spirit beings who mediated on behalf of mankind, and salvation was attained

through acquiring special knowledge. They believed that God didn't and would never have created the world but instead God put forth "aeons" which were spirit beings just a little more distant from Him at each step, each one having just a little less divinity than Himself and at the end of the chain were beings so removed from God but having enough deity left in them that they were able to create the physical world. Thus the world was the creation of lesser gods and so distant from God that they were hostile towards Him. The intermediate "aeons" or lesser gods inhabited stars and ruled man's destiny (think of astrology today). Therefore, they were to be appeased and worshiped - and when they sought to include Christian teaching into it, the Gnostics saw angels as the perfect beings to worship - they were the Christian teaching of aeons. Of course, the belief that all matter is evil made it impossible for them to believe in the incarnation of God in Christ. They would say that Christ only appeared to be human but was a phantom. Another view was that Jesus Christ was only one of the intermediaries between God and man so that they denied the deity of Christ as He was only human and the aeon of Christ was only in Him temporarily. (Thus Paul wrote 2:10.) Gnostics believed that matter was evil and so they would turn to two alternative thoughts. One taught asceticism (inflicting harsh treatment upon the body) and the other taught libertinism (license). Both of these mistakes are addressed by Paul in his letter. The knowledge that led to salvation for the Gnostic was occult pervaded by superstitions, astrology and magic. It was only available to those who had been initiated into the system.) **3)** The Christian element in the error was a mixture of Judaism and paganism. It did not deny Christ but rather dethroned Him. They gave Christ a place but not the supreme place. This made the teaching all the more dangerous.

The fact that Paul wrote this letter showed that the threat to the church was real and there are indications in the letter that the heretics were not making much ground as He rejoiced over their continued faithfulness to Christ.

Now remember the things I just told you about Gnosticism and the heresies present at Colossae and listen to this. The theme of the book is the absolute supremacy of and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ. A.T. Robertson said that this is "*Paul's full-length portrait of Christ.*" As we will see, Paul sets Christ as: God's Son, object of the Christian faith, Redeemer, the image of God, Lord of creation, head of the church, reconciler of the universe, and in Him dwells the fulness of the Godhead and under Him every power and authority in the universe is subjected. He is the essence of the mystery of God and in Him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge lie hidden. Christ is the standard by which every other religious teaching is to be measured and reality of the truth. By the cross He conquered the cosmic powers of evil and following His resurrection He was enthroned at the right hand of God. As a result, the life of Christians is now hidden in Christ and one day, He and we will be gloriously manifested.

Colossians and Ephesians are "sister epistles". They were both written during one of Paul's imprisonments, sent to believers in Asia, entrusted and delivered by Tychicus. Many of the topics are common to both letters though Ephesians is a much more detailed letter. 60% of the teaching of Colossians is found in Ephesians. This is why most believe Colossians was written first as it was Paul's original thoughts and then he expanded upon them for the Ephesian church. The main difference between the two letters is that while Christ is shown as Lord in both, in Ephesians He is head over the church and Paul stresses the church in that letter. While Ephesians is calm letter, Colossians is more polemical.

Colossians 1:1-14 - The first fourteen verses are the introduction to the letter. They give a greeting and prayer for the Colossian church.

I. Paul's salutation - **Read Colossians 1:1-2**

A. How does Paul identify himself in this letter? (v.1 - apostle)

1. The root word for "apostle" was first used of a cargo ship or fleet of ships. Later it denoted the commander of a naval expedition or leader of a band of colonists sent overseas. It is used in the Bible to describe one who has been commissioned and empowered by God to be His authorized spokesperson or one clothed with the power of the one sending him. The apostle is acting as God's personal representative or ambassador.

2. How does Paul say he became an apostle? (v.1 - by God's will)

3. Why do you think it was important that Paul identified himself as an apostle to the Colossian church?

4. Who else was with Paul when he wrote the letter to the Colossians? (Timothy)

5. Why do you think Paul included Timothy in the greeting? (It was a matter of courtesy as Timothy was with Paul at that time.)

B. Who were the recipients of this letter in Colossae? (v.2 - saints and faithful brothers)

1. Who were the saints in Colossae?

2. In the Old Testament holiness was ascribed not only to people but also to places and things. This shows us that the root idea of holiness is not excellence in character but rather dedication, the state of being set apart for the work and worship of God. In the New Testament, the word holy is used of people. This shows that Paul considered the Colossian Christians as part of God's people and part of the new Israel.

3. What is required of us to be considered holy?

4. Paul also says that these Christians are "faithful in Christ". What does Paul mean by a church being "faithful in Christ"? (there is a loyalty to Christ, a dedication and love for Christ and the things of Christ such as His church body in Colossae, etc. The important thing to keep in mind is that this faithfulness is not something we produce within ourselves but rather is a character trait of Jesus that is exhibited in us when we love Him. He is faithful through us. We are not able to be faithful to God on our own.)

5. The word "brother" denotes intimacy of Christian fellowship and affection despite the differences in culture, social status, and racial background. In Christ, they all constituted one spiritual family. The word also points to oneness of parentage - we all share the same Heavenly Father.

6. Paul wished the Colossians both grace and peace from God our Father.

a. Grace is the favor of God given to all freely by faith. It is the essence of God's saving activity and sustaining activity of His Holy Spirit.

b. Peace means more than just the absence of hostility but rather in the New Testament, the wholeness or soundness that comes from the prosperity of the Lord and the contentedness that follows, especially in regards to relations to others.

c. Why do you think Paul used the terms "grace and peace" in the introduction to this letter?

d. How do you think we can convey the ideas of grace and peace today?

II. Prayer of Thanksgiving - **Read Colossians 1:3-8**

A. The content of Paul's thanksgiving is determined by the condition of the church and Paul's relation to it through Epaphras.

1. God is the One recognized as the One responsible for the virtues and graces of the Colossian Christians and the ultimate success of the gospel.

2. The God being addressed and the God to which Paul and the Colossian Christians prayed is the same One made known through Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who revealed God to us as Father.

B. What are the three things Paul gives as grounds for his thanksgiving in relation to the church? (v. 3 - the good report that came to him, v.6 - the gospel bore fruit in them as it does elsewhere, vv. 7-8 - and the work of Epaphras among them)

1. We see here the triad of faith, love and hope that Paul uses in other writings.

a. **Romans 5:1-5**

b. **I Corinthians 13:13**

c. **I Thessalonians 5:8**

2. Christ is the object of faith on which Christian faith stands and Christ is the sphere which Christian faith operates. **I Thessalonians 5:23-24** gives us the picture that God is the one who is faithful and He will bring our sanctification to pass by His power. We yield to His direction and cooperate with Him to see Him work through us.

a. What makes Christ the appropriate object of our faith?

b. Why do people have a tendency to want to live by sight and not faith?

3. Love is the fruit of faith in Christ. It is proof of faith's genuineness.

a. **Galatians 5:6**

b. This love is a caring love that counts no sacrifice too great for the one loved.

c. Who was the object of the Colossian church's love? (v.4 - all the saints - in other words they were concerned about more than just their fellowship of believers)

d. In what ways can we show Christ's love for believers outside our fellowship?

4. Hope is used objectively here meaning that the focus is on the thing/outcome hoped for.

a. What do the Colossians hope for? (v.5)

b. This hope is secure because it is safely stored up for them in heaven, like a treasure under heavy guard. Also, the Colossians knowledge and hope come from hearing which in this context is the gospel coming to them. They heard the gospel and believed in and now have hope. This then leads to greater faith and greater love - it's an upward spiral in faith in Christ.

c. What phrase does Paul use to modify the "gospel" in v.5? (word of truth- this is to counter the later so-called gospel being presented to them)

5. The second thing Paul was thankful for in the Colossian church was that the gospel did bear fruit in their lives such is evidence of God's hand at work.

a. The mark that the authentic gospel is being preached is the fruit is being born. Everywhere it is preached, it bears fruit as the power of God's grace is always active.

b. The gospel conveys the knowledge of God's grace in all its truth. In other words, the new gospel being presented by the proto-gnostics is a sham. Instead of divine grace it offers only bondage to legalism and human traditions. It's important to note that in Paul's mind, the gospel was far more than the message of how to get saved. It encompassed the whole of Christian teaching the focused on the love of God in Christ for the salvation of mankind.

c. What are some of the subtle ways the world seeks to mix it's useless notions of life

with the true gospel message?

d. Why are legalism and ritualism so dangerous to the Christian faith? (the demote Christ to a lesser role in our lives. He becomes part of the “solution” rather than the “only solution”.)

6. The third item in Paul’s expression of thanksgiving was for the work of Epaphras who was the one who instructed the Colossians in the gospel.

a. We know very little about Epaphras other than what we see in this letter and Philemon. He was a native of Colossae.

1) **Colossians 1:7**

2) **Colossians 4:12-13**

3) **Philemon 23**

b. From these passages, what can we know about Epaphras?

c. Epaphras proved to be an effective minister of the gospel and true brother and co-laborer of Paul’s. For this friendship and trusted partnership in the gospel, Paul was thankful.

d. We need to be thankful for those other believer who are committed to the ministry of the Lord, as we are.

7. Now considering all the aspects of Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving, are there some areas of God’s grace to you where you should show more thankfulness?

III. Prayer of petition - Read Colossians 1:9-14

A. After thanking God for the Colossian church, Paul launches into a petition for the church. What are the requests Paul makes for the Colossian church in this prayer?

1. v.9 - to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will

2. v.10 - to be able to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in everything

3. v.10b - that they bear fruit in every good work

4. v. 10 - to grow in the knowledge of God

5. v. 11 - to be strengthened with power according to God’s glorious might

6. v.11 - to attain steadfastness and patience in their lives

7. vv. 12 - to be grateful for God and the blessings of sharing in the inheritance of the saints.

B. Paul makes these petitions based upon the things he was thankful for in vv. 3-8.

1. In what way should the things we are thankful for shape our requests to God? (think of seeing the thankful items as where God is working and how we can join Him by asking along the lines of what we are thankful for - just one example)

2. What do you see as the thread that connects all of Paul’s requests together?

a. **Matthew 6:33**

b. The kingdom of God. Paul wants to make sure that the church at Colossae fulfills its mission to advance the kingdom of God by its active participation in the true gospel.

c. Go back over the list of what Paul prayed for. Which do you think is the greatest need of believers today in order to be active participants kingdom work?

C. There are a few words I’d like to bring a deeper meaning to in this section.

1. v.9 - “know” is not the usual word for knowledge but one that means knowledge in the fullest sense. In the New Testament this word is only used of moral and religious knowledge. Paul is praying for the Colossian believers to know the whole purpose of God as revealed in Christ. This sort of knowledge would flow freely and fill one’s whole being -

one's thoughts, affections, purposes and plans. While the false teachers claimed to offer a fulness of God's blessing that wasn't present in Epaphras's gospel, Paul answered them by stressing that this true fulness was only available in Christ.

2. v. 11 - attaining steadfastness and patience. Steadfastness is the term that means the opposite of cowardice and despondency. It is taking a bold initiative in a matter of God's will. Patience is the usual word of long-suffering and is the opposite of wrath or a spirit of revenge when wronged. It speaks of even-temperedness, that in spite of injury or insult it does not retaliate. Why do you think these qualities are essential for a Christian to demonstrate?

3. V. 12 - qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. "Qualified" means to be made sufficient or competent. In themselves, the Colossians, like all mankind, was not qualified to inherit anything from the Lord. They can experience this qualification only through an act of God. The tense of the verb is such (aorist) that it points to the time of the Colossian's conversion. It does not describe a process but rather a point in time, an instantaneous act. One moment they were lost and the next moment they were saved and qualified to share in the inheritance of God's people. The only other instance of this word "qualified" showing up in the New Testament is in **II Corinthians 3:6** where Paul says that God made us (qualified us) as adequate as servants of the new covenant. Again, it is God who did the qualifying - not we ourselves by our own works. It is the result of our faith in God's ability and then Him doing His saving work in our hearts.

a. What makes a person qualified to share in God's inheritance?

b. Do we ever add stipulations or make this a process rather than see it as a point?

C. Paul then launches into another list of things he's thankful for in what Christ has done for believers.

1. He delivered us from the domain of darkness. [**Acts 26:16-18**] The word "delivered" means to rescue or liberate. Darkness is symbolic of ignorance, falsehood and sin. Q: What do you see as some of the strongholds of darkness in our culture today?

2. God didn't stop at liberating us. He transferred us (brought us) into the kingdom of His beloved Son. This word of "transfer" is used of taking a person from one country and moving them to colonize and settle another land. This is exactly what we are now doing as believers. This kingdom is the kingdom of the heart - not geography.

Q: What does it mean to be part of God's kingdom?

Q: What are some ways we confuse the kingdom of God with earthly kingdoms?

3. Though Christ, God's beloved Son, we have redemption.

Q: What does it mean to be redeemed?

Q: What is the implication that Paul stressed about redemption in this verse?

This verse teaches us that the redemption of the saints is a present tense possession. The release and liberation we received was due to the great price Jesus paid on the cross on our behalf. This phrase is used in secular literature to describe prisoners of war being liberated from their captivity. That is an excellent picture for us to keep in minds as well.

4. Forgiveness literally means "to send away". Our sins have been sent away so that they are no longer a barrier between us and God. While redemption and forgiveness are not exactly parallel ideas, by these two terms showing up in this grammatical manner, it shows us that the primary feature of redemption is forgiveness of sins. That's God's focus on why He paid

the price to buy us back from sin.

Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?