

Week 1

Colossians Overview

The foundational theme of the bible is living by faith. The purpose of the bible is to reveal God's plan for redemption. In light of this let us consider the book of Colossians inductively, that is, letting the book tell us what it means. What are some of the important questions to ask to learn about this portion of God's word? Who were the Colossians, where is Colossae, what kind of writing is this and who wrote it, and most importantly I believe, why was it written? Another way of saying this is; what was the author's purpose and why did the people of Colossae need this instruction? How can we apply this to our lives in the 21st century and what changes do we need to make in our life to benefit from these instructions and warnings?

I believe we can find the answers to these questions with the help of our loving God Who inspired this letter to us via the church at Colossae.

We have answered the first question; it is a letter or epistle. The writer of this letter is the Apostle Paul and we know this for certain because he kindly identified himself in chapter 1 verse 1; Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother to the saints and the faithful brethren in Jesus Christ, who are in Colossae, that is, the believers in the small town of Colossae.

The writer, Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote this letter and this little church of new believers was on his heart and he had important things to tell them. Apparently Timothy was there with Paul as was writing this. Whether or not Timothy was also a prisoner, I don't know. Also Epaphrus, the founder of the Colossian church was there. Paul's prison was a rented house as we see in Acts 28:16 and he was allowed to entertain visitors and to preach.

So in about 60 AD, about 30 years after Jesus had ascended into heaven, this letter to the Colossians was penned.

What do we know about the Colossians? Lets look at the context, that is the time and place of the recipients of this letter.

The Roman Empire was still in charge and it was divided into provinces. The recalcitrant provinces were imperial and were under the crown. A procurator, governed with an army a recalcitrant colony, Israel was just such a colony.

The second kind of province was a senatorial province, these were the ones who were at peace with Roman rule and were administered by the Roman senate. The richest and most famous of these was the province of Asia. The capital of the Roman province in Asia was Ephesus, one of the greatest cities of the empire. The greatest cities of the empire were first, Rome, then Alexandria, third Antioch (Paul's hometown) and 4th Ephesus.

Ephesus is located in a fertile valley called the Lycus Valley and nearby was 3 other cities. One was Laodicea then across the Lycus River was Hierapolis, a health resort. Hierapolis was the home of the Delphian Oracle and considered a sacred city where people would go to have their fortune told. You can imagine this was the home of cultic and pagan religions.

Colossae was about 100 miles east of Ephesus in Phrygia, a district of Asia, which is now Turkey. Colossae had been on an east west trade route, perhaps had been a military base and at one time had been a thriving commercial center. By the time of Paul's missionary journeys the trade route had changed and Colossae was off the beaten path. A great earthquake about the same time this letter was written also reduced the city.

The population was a mix of Phrygians, Greeks and the Jews whose ancestors had fled Israel during the time of persecution. So the little church in Colossae was composed of a diverse mix of Gentiles and Jews. That sounds like a challenging group to try to pastor with the gospel doesn't it?

Laodicea was extremely affluent and in the midst of this city was also a church of believers. Paul instructed the Colossians in Chapter 2:1 that he was praying not only for them but also the Laodiceans. Jesus addressed those believers in the book of Revelation written about 30 years after this letter, and He was not very complimentary. See Revelation 3:14.

In Acts 19:10 we learn that Paul had lived in Ephesus for 3 years, teaching and preaching. Perhaps Epaphrus was saved as a result of this and went to Colossae with the good news. Paul had never been to Colossae and did not know these converts as we see in 2:1.

Missionaries had established churches in the Lycus Valley. Friends, Jesus had told His disciples to go out and make disciples and they all obeyed and they were successful, their work bore eternal spiritual fruit, for which they all were martyred. Of course, their reward is great and we will be able to celebrate with them someday because, somehow the truth of the gospel, which we have learned came from the obedience of

those 12 men. Some evangelist, apparently Epaphrus, won these new believers to Christ.

Think about Paul writing this letter from a Roman prison as his friend Epaphrus has told him of the condition of the church at Colossae. In fact, we know Epaphrus' heart was greatly burdened for all the churches in the Lycus River Valley. In Colossians 4:12 Paul said Epaphrus was laboring fervently in prayer for them, the idea being agonizing for them in prayer, and why was that, so that "you may be perfect and complete in all the will of God". What a prayer to have someone praying for you; that you be perfect and complete in doing the will of God.

What was going on with these folks in the Lycus Valley that was so burdening Epaphrus and Paul and drew this letter for their instruction and warning?

New ideas were sweeping through the Roman Empire and one was Gnosticism. What is this? I am glad you asked because we have it with us today and its still causing confusion under several other names. Basically it is a philosophical approach to the worship of God, which emphasized the mind and taught that salvation could be obtained through knowledge (gnosis) instead of faith. They believed only certain people could obtain this knowledge; it was not available to ordinary people like us. So here was a strong appeal to human pride. Gnosticism twisted the truth of the gospel, which the Colossians had been taught. The term Gnostic tells the story; gnosis is the Greek word meaning knowledge and the Gnostics were the "knowing ones".

Have you ever been told you are really smart, or complimented on your knowledge of something, remember how tempted you were to feel proud?

Gnostics believed you could relate to God through your intellect, rather than by faith and you can imagine how this could produce proud and arrogant people. The Gnostics also believed matter was evil and God, being Spirit is good, they said everything but God is evil. So how do you get evil men connected with the good and perfect God? This is where it gets complicated. According to the Gnostics there had to be emanations or angels which successively created other angels and after many had been created finally there was a really good one who could deal powerfully with evil matter, that One being Jesus. So they combined the gospel with their false religion. That is why Paul in the first chapter goes to great lengths to describe the uniqueness of Jesus, what He has done and how He is God, not an angel or an emanation from God.

Now just as the Gnostics taught that people needed emanations as intermediaries to God, some religions today teach that you have to have an intermediary other than

Jesus? I wonder if they got their ideas of angels and other intermediaries from Gnosticism. This gives us insight into Colossians 2:18 where Paul said to the people; Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind". This covered all the bases of Gnostic religion. The word defrauding here is a Greek word which has the idea of keeping people from salvation. It's a good word for all of us, friends, don't let anyone defraud you that is, keep you from salvation by false teaching.

How did Gnosticism work itself out in life? It went two ways; one was called asceticism; people withdrawing completely from life. We can see this worked out in Buddhism, Stoicism and monastic Christianity; withdrawal behind walls from the evil world. Today there are groups of people who withdraw and live together, dress a certain way and teach that only by belonging to their group can you obtain salvation. Paul addressed this when he talked about self abasement or false humility created by self-denial which leads to pride. God said to the Ephesians "by faith are you saved, not by works". No human works can save anyone, not rituals, traditions, certain clothing.

The other way it was lived out was just the opposite; Epicureanism: these folks believed matter was evil but couldn't touch the soul so it didn't matter what you did, any sinning was just fine because you would finally die, the evil body would be lost and your pure soul would be untouched. You can imagine the excesses this would lead people to do.

Mary Baker Eddy, who founded Christian Science believed in Gnosticisms with her own twist and she led her followers to believe the matter is evil, including the body, their minds are superior over their bodies and they really don't have to have disease, they can think their way out of it. Therefore they should not seek medical help when ill. This has, even today, caused tremendous suffering. The Word of faith cult has incorporated some of these beliefs.

False religions usually have no real fixed truth? People interpret their rules their way even within a religious group. Here is a rule of thumb; all false religions are eager to tell you what they don't do and they feel superior because of it.

The bottom line was Gnosticism undermined the gospel and the divinity of Jesus Christ, which every false religion has been doing until now and will keep doing as long as God allows. It also despised the beautiful Creation of God in the world around them by saying it was evil matter. Gnosticism elevated the role of angels beyond the truth revealed in the scriptures and reduced Christianity to one of many good ideas, which they tried to combine with their other doctrines.

What about all the attention given to angels today? You often see them as beautiful blond women with wings, not once in the scripture is an angel referred to as female; always they are male in the bible. Neither are they ever portrayed as attractive or inviting, quite the opposite. Whenever angels are mentioned interacting with humans in the scriptures the human is so afraid they fall on their face. Just remember what angels are always quoted saying, "fear not"?

The gospel was introduced into this culture and the Colossians had to deal with many conflicting ideas; just as we do today. A kind of proto-Gnosticism also became popular in Colossae, a combination of Gnostic concepts and Judaism.

We have talked about just a few ideas of Gnosticism, that there are certain people with special knowledge, Paul shoots that down. I like what Paul said in Chapter 1:28 We proclaim Him, referring to Jesus Christ, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ". So Paul said in his letter that there is no such thing as anyone having special or secret knowledge that the truth of the gospel is for everyone. Friends, in God's kingdom Paul says there is neither, slave nor free, man nor woman, neither Jew nor Greek, all are alike. God doesn't play favorites. All truth is revealed in the bible, there is nothing I can understand that you cannot understand.

Paul also heard that some Jewish leaders asserted that true believers had to observe certain days, deny certain foods and follow rituals. The pagan element emphasized self-denial, worship of angels and mystical wisdom. This toxic mix of pagan religion and Judaism was deadly to the Colossians.

With these things as background you can easily understand Paul's concern for this little church and these new believers. Paul wrote them this letter to refute the error and to get the believers back on track. To do so, Paul highlighted the preeminence of Christ and the importance of godly living. Some say that Colossians is the most Christ centered book in the bible. And that is exactly why I chose this book for this bible study. After the study of John and the record of Jesus' victory over sin and death I was led to Colossians as a follow up. A sure way to spot the counterfeit is to thoroughly know the real, so Paul went to great lengths to describe Jesus, Who He is and what He has done. Today you need to know the real that is, you need to know Who Jesus is and what He has done and that is revealed in your bible. If you really know your Savior you will not be deceived by false teachings of our culture. You will have a biblical worldview. God's Word will deliver you from the viewpoints of the world if you will renew your mind daily. Paul's letter to the Colossians is a perfect place for you to learn about Jesus and how to avoid the counterfeit. I have heard that people who are experts in detecting counterfeit money study the real thing so much

that they are thoroughly familiar with it and then they immediately recognize the counterfeit. This approach to the bible will pay real dividends to you. Study your bible, know it thoroughly and its Author and you will not be deceived.

I pray as we study through this letter you will use your God given intellect to evaluate your own belief system. Is it based on God's Word and centered on Christ? Or do you rely of human traditions, psychology and your ability to think?

We have talked about certain pagan beliefs and now we are going to study Paul's warning against them. I pray you will not be deceived by popular ideas of our culture, which appeal to the flesh but are wrong. Keep Jesus, God's only Son and our Savior, at the center of your life. Follow only Him, your crucified and risen Lord.

Here is an outline of what we will be studying for the next few weeks; Paul's introduction to the Colossians includes a greeting, thanksgiving and a prayer for spiritual wisdom and strength for these believers. He then gives doctrine regarding the Person and work of Christ.

From there Paul reminds the Colossians that the world's teachings, such as we have talked about earlier are empty when compared with God's plan and he challenges them to reject shallow ideas and live in union with Christ. He is also adamant that they not mix their false beliefs with the truth of the gospel

In the third chapter Paul gets very practical with the Colossians and talks about what the divinity, death and resurrection of Jesus should mean to all believers. Since our eternal destiny is a sure and certain hope, heaven should fill our thoughts, sexual impurity and other worldly lusts should be completely avoided and truth, love and peace should be the mark of our lives.

In chapter 4 Paul tells us that we should continually pray and tell others the Good News about Jesus as often as we can. In Jesus we have everything we need to live the Christian life.

The main themes of this book include Christ's Divinity, Christ as Head of the Church, Union with Christ, truth about God.

Why is it important for us to study the book of Colossians? Because Christ is divine and LORD of all creation and our lives must be centered around Him. We must honor Him as our God. There can be no substitute, additions or subtractions to what the bible tells us about Jesus. He is God. Is Jesus the LORD of your life? Do you honor and worship Him as God?

Not only is Jesus divine and LORD of all creation but He is Head of the Church, the final authority to whom all must give an account. He expects His followers to obey Him completely. In fact in John 3, he interchanges the word love for obedience to him

To acknowledge Jesus as our Head and our LORD we must bow to His leadership in all we think and do. Do you feel pressure from friends, loved ones to think or act contrary to God's Word? We must obey Him no matter what others say or think.

All the way through this book we are seeing the message that since believers' are forgiven and united with Christ we are in permanent union with Him and that bond can never be broken. Jesus stated this clearly in John 10: My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand". In response to this we should focus on heaven, live as believers and get rid of sinful habits and commit ourselves to good works with a thankful heart for all He has done.

Colossae was filled with false religion and teachers who promoted heresy that stressed keeping rituals and rules in order to attain eternal life. They emphasized human knowledge and missed God's wisdom; they focused on philosophy. Concentrated on visions and angels then they tried to combine all this with Christianity. I call this a smorgasbord religion; collecting parts and pieces you like and creating your own system, there is no room for the exclusivity Christ in this.

I encourage you to take Christ and don't hold on to your own theories and ideas and try to blend them into Christianity. Trust no teaching more than God's word no matter how much you like the teacher or group. Keep your focus on Christ and live by God's Word.