

Session #1: Colossians Introduction

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Today we begin a new study of the Letter to the Colossians. My hope is that as we move through our discussions you will see it as a glorious reminder of everything Christ did for us in conquering sin and death. This letter demonstrates Jesus, as the Son of God, His sovereignty over all things. It should also explain for us and challenge us to understand what our response should be as people of faith.



Author

Once again, we enter into a bit of controversy over the authorship. For nineteen centuries scholars held St. Paul as the undisputed author of the letter. Twice he is identified – in the opening (1:1) and in the closing (4:18). From the beginning the Church Fathers accepted the authorship of this document as coming from the hand of St. Paul. Then came the nineteenth century and with more access to the conversation, greater depth in scholarship St. Paul’s authorship came into question. Today, with modern scholarship the conversation is split into half. Half favoring St. Paul as the author and half suggesting that Timothy penned this document but under the watchful eye and scholarly advice from St. Paul.

Those who believe this document was written by St. Timothy or some other disciple think so because of two reasons:

- the style of writing is very different from those of the “undisputed” letters of St. Paul (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon)
- the overall theology of the document is different. In Colossians there is an emphasis on a “realized eschatology (end of the world) having a focus on the blessings of salvation that Christians *already enjoy*.

There is also the absence of key St. Paul terms such as “righteousness” and “law” and addressing the readers as “brothers” leads scholars to see Colossians as distinctive. But whomever wrote it was very familiar with St. Paul’s writing style and more importantly with his theology. Some scholars suggest that St. Paul possibly could have been supervising the writing of this letter knowing that one day soon he would not be around and would need others to act as a “bridge” into life without St. Paul’s direct leadership.

Those who are in support of St. Paul’s authorship, this letter appears to be written under the same set of circumstances as his other captivity letters. We read that St. Paul is in prison (Colossians 4:3); sent jointly by St. Paul and St. Timothy (Colossians 1:1). St. Paul is surrounded by the same circle of friends (Colossians 4:10-14). One scholar (Fr. Dennis Hamm) in support of St. Paul as the author gives the following reasons for his belief. It begins with the striking similarities between Colossians and Ephesians.

- Both celebrate Jesus as the head of the universal church
- Both describe the church as Jesus' body in language that is both poetic and hymnic
- Both speak of God's plan entailing the "mystery" of God's revelation to the Gentiles
- Both explain how life in the body of Christ transforms all the relationships of the household
- Both speak of Tychicus (using basically the same words) as the bearer of the letter.

The connection between Colossians and Ephesians is so close that some scholars suggest that Colossians is a (not so rough) draft of what is later offered in Ephesians. There is a good chance that St. Paul, in writing Colossians saw the universal nature of the message and wanting to communicate these ideas later wrote Ephesians. (Please remember that scholars agree, while the Letter to the Ephesians is identified with this once community, the letter was intended to be sent out to all the Churches as a common homily or teaching. Ephesians was written as a universal letter a circular letter.) It is possible that St. Paul sent Tychicus off, in company of Onesimus with three letters – one to the community at Colossae (where Philemon lived), one to be delivered to his friend, Philemon and after which to take one (the letter we now know as Ephesians) to all the church in what is present day central and western Turkey.

Finally, in support of St. Paul as the author, we will read in 4:1, as we did in Philemon 1:19, St. Paul writing: *in my own hand*. While it is most probably that St. Paul dictated to a scribe, the letter is still his words, his ideas, his letter. But to assure those who would receive the letter that he is the author, St. Paul takes the quill in hand to pen a few lines.

Date Colossians was written

Depending on which "camp" you belong to this letter could have been written as early at 60 AD or as late as 80 AD. Those who believe that St. Paul was the author support the earlier date suggesting the written was done sometime between 60-62 AD, which places this letter among the group known as St. Paul's captivity letters. If written by a disciple then that places the letter after the death of St. Paul and could be written as late as 80 AD.

Community of Colossae

Once a primary thriving industrial center second only to Ephesus, Colossae had declined over the years. So much so that in the first century, while still a major city, a shadow of what it had once been. The city of Colossae was part of a cluster of towns – Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae. Colossae was the smallest of the three. Church in Colossae was most likely founded by Epaphras who, after meeting and being converted by St. Paul, established this Church in his (Epaphras) home community. This region was a Roman province and was found in the southwestern corner of what is today Turkey. These towns were found in the Lycus Valley along side the Meander River. (Yes, the name of the river is the basis of the verb *meanders*.) The Meander Rivers was a major trade route from east to west and back and as such Colossae was a cosmopolitan city with different cultural and religious elements that were mingled together. For the most part, the inhabitants of the area as well

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as the Church, were Gentiles, but there was a considerable quantity of Jews among them. In fact, Barclay wrote, "...we may well put the Jewish population as high as almost 50,000 people. It is suggested from Acts 16:14 (Lydia, the merchant in purple cloth) that textiles such as cloth was a predominant trade in the region.

Why Does St. Paul Write?

This church was not a community that St. Paul spent time in. He writes: *for you and for those in Laodicea and all who have not seen me face to face (2:1)*. It is most likely that St. Paul is responding to reports from Epaphras' visits and/or correspondence. It seems that there has been a philosophy that has invaded the thinking and practice of the church community planting doubts that St. Paul wants to put down. What that philosophy was we can only guess. The clues in the letter itself are:

- The problem appears to be that there this "philosophy" is causing Christians to error in faith. Scholars say this because St. Paul describes them as *not holding closely to the head, that is, Christ (2:19)*, as well as: *why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? (2:20)*.
- Whoever is the protagonist espousing this philosophy has sent themselves up against the Christians in Colossae. *Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths (2:16)*.
- This philosophy has something to do with the worship of angels as well as other practices: *Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking (2:18)*.
- This philosophy seems to be challenging the idea that the community is important, causing some in the Church of Colossae to leave. *Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on ...not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God (2:18-19)*.
- This philosophy had something to do with teaching regarding the elemental powers of the world demanding a ban against certain material things (severe fasting and abstinence): *Why do you submit to regulations, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"?* (2:20-21).
- Finally, the mention of "Sabbath" in relationship to the "new moon" and "festival" in 2:16 tells us that Jewish practices are part of the mix.

Could this be the Judaizers? Maybe. Most likely this philosophy is a combination of Jewish and pagan practices that those that espouse this philosophy *that they argue that a Christian can only qualify as complete if he or she takes on this particular set of beliefs and practices, which involve fasting, severe physical discipline, the experience of visions, and the appeasing of various spiritual go-betweens called "principalities and powers" or "elements of the universe."* (Fr. Dennis Hamm)

Theological Themes we will encounter

In many ways the letter to the Colossian, while bearing several similarities to St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, (common themes and expressions and some identical teachings), is unique among his other letters. There is a specific problem that St. Paul must deal with and he is almost aggressive in doing so. The major theme of this document is to deal with what has become known in some biblical circles as the Colossians heresy. This heresy was the merging involving four elements of both pagan and Jewish origin into Christian belief and practice. Those four elements are:

1. denying the all sufficiency and pre-eminence of Christ (Colossians 2:8).
2. Judaist ceremonialism - which attached special significance to the rite of circumcision, food regulations, and observance of special days (Colossians 2:11,16-17)
3. Angel worship ((Colossians 2:18)
4. Asceticism, the practice of self-denial and self-discipline simply for the sake of doing so, which called for harsh treatment of the body (Colossians 2:20-23)

St. Paul attacks each of these issues by reminding the community at Colossae that Jesus Christ is the fullness of God and our belief in Him, our dedication to Him, our living our lives following Him is all that is required in faith.

Pertinence for Today

In our world today, we are bombarded with messages telling us a "better" way to live. From the commercials everywhere proclaiming that if we wear these shoes, or eat this product or drink this beer we will be happy, healthy and the life of the party; to the various "religious" messages (astrology, scientology, the occult...) seeking to show us the way. It is tempting, at times, to want to put our trust in these tangible philosophies and ideologies that require less of us. But in the end, in walking down their paths we find ourselves in spiritual or even physical (alcohol, drugs) bondage. In the face of these daily dangers St. Paul powerfully calls us to recognize that Christ is all we need. Why look elsewhere when Jesus is the fullness of wisdom and our fulfillment and true life come from entering ever more deeply into *the riches of the glory of this mystery* which is *Christ in you, the hope for glory* (Colossians 1:27). We study this letter because we must be constantly reminded that NOTHING is to displace the importance of our direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Outline of the Letter to the Colossians

1. Opening Address (1:1-14)
 - a. Greeting (1:1-2)
 - b. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)
 - c. Prayer (1:9-14)
2. Christian Belief (1:15-2:23)
 - a. The Preeminence of Christ (1:15-23)
 - b. The Ministry of Paul (1:24-2:7)
 - c. The Cross and Circumcision of Christ (2:8-15)
 - d. The Shadows of the Old Covenant (2:16-23)

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3. Christian Behavior (3:1-4:6)
 - a. A New Mind of Christ (3:1-4)
 - b. A New Life in Christ (3:5-17)
 - c. Family Life in Christ (3:18-4:1)
 - d. Prayer and Conversation in Christ (4:2-6)
4. Closing Farewell (4:7-18)
 - a. The Commendation of Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9)
 - b. Final Greetings and Instructions (4:10-18)

Opening Address 1:1-2

These opening two verses are almost identical to the opening words of 2 Corinthians (1:1). As we will study, St. Paul identified himself as an apostle of Christ. In other letters he defended that title. Here in Colossae scholars believe he offers the title to establish his authority with the community since he has not met them face to face.

1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus: Today we look at the return address or quickly glance at the end of the letter, but in that period of time all letter began by identifying the sender. St. Paul identifies himself as *an apostle of Christ*. While he was not one of the original twelve, St. Paul always understood himself as especially chosen by God because of his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). This identification as an apostle of Christ was something that he had to defend and explain (2 Corinthians 11) because not everyone saw him that way. In some editions of the bible we could read *Paul, an ambassador of Christ Jesus*. Either way, St. Paul understood his role, his mission, his life as representing God through Jesus Christ. One final comment on St. Paul's use of the identification of apostle. The Greek word used, *Apostolos* can also be translated *ambassador*. The word means one who is sent by or represents the sender. There is a hidden message in this title. Dead people do not send. St. Paul, and all the Apostles us that title to proclaim that Jesus, the sender is alive!

This letter also identifies **Timothy** as in company with St. Paul in sending the letter. St. Timothy was born in the city of Lystra (central Anatolia present day Turkey) of a Jewish mother and Greek father. He one of St. Paul's closest companions. They met during St. Paul's second missionary trip (Acts 16:1-5) and from there became a constant companion in the mission and ministry of St. Paul, along with Silas. St. Timothy became the first Bishop of Ephesus. It is possible that St. Timothy is acting as St. Paul's scribe, therefore why he is included in the greeting.

1:2 To the saints: Might also read *To the holy ones*. The word "saint" comes from the Greek verb *hagiazō* meaning "to set apart" or "to sanctify or make holy". In the Old Testament, God's call to the Israelites was an action of setting them apart so as to make them a holy people; but, God remained unapproachable by the ordinary individual. God was only accessible to the priests of the Temple and only under certain circumstances when they could enter the Tabernacle, or Holy of Holies in the

Temple. With Jesus' death and resurrection, God became accessible to all. New Testament writers used the identification of "saint" to mean those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. In that belief they were (we are) set apart from all others.

faithful brothers in Christ: The identification of "brothers" is inclusive meaning both men and women of the community. The word *pistos* can be translated to mean both faith filled or trustworthy. Since St. Paul has not met these people he offering a compliment to them. That through those who speak of the community at Colossae, St. Paul knows that they are both faithful and trustworthy in their walk in Christ.

at Colossae: an ancient city in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). It was an important city from the 5th century BC but had dwindled by the time of St. Paul's writing.

Thanksgiving 1:3-8

In Greco-Roman letters of that period it was customary to follow the greeting with prayer and thanksgiving. Generally, St. Paul, (and we find it here in Colossians), will speak of "giving thanks", "praying" and recollect how those who are receiving the letter came to faith. Those letters attributed to St. Paul usually have these elements (except Galatians, 1 and 2 Timothy). It is also interesting to note that St. Paul will speak of those primary virtues of faith (verse 4), hope (verse 5) and love (verse 4), He goes on to speak of how it is because of these that he has "expectations" (verse 5) of their reward in heaven.

1:3 We always give thanks: The "we" is referring to St. Paul and St. Timothy.

1:5 you have heard before in the word of truth: As the sentence goes on to say we hear this word of truth ***in the gospel***. St. Paul is acknowledging that the community at Colossae has received the gospel into their hearts and lives. They are living the truth of salvation through Jesus Christ.

1:6 in the whole world: Not that I presume to correct St. Paul, but it would be better written to say "in the whole *known* world. St. Paul is speaking specifically of the Greco-Roman world. The Christian message, the story of salvation has spread far and wide and could be found everywhere they went. And Colossae likewise has heard and received this message and are blessed because of it.

1:7 Epaphras, our beloved servant: Epaphras was the founder of the Church in Colossae. His mission and ministry also took him to the Churches in the near by cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. It is likely that Epaphras was a merchant or someone who had cause to travel. Scholars suggest that Epaphras was converted by St. Paul while both were in Ephesus. Otherwise there is little known about him other than he is also mention in St. Paul's letter to Philemon (1:23). By St. Paul calling him *our beloved servant* we know that Epaphras was not only a missionary for the gospel but one St. Paul thinks highly of.

Prayer 1:9-14

In the six verses 3-8, St. Paul spoke of his and Timothy's gratitude for the grace given to the community in Colossae. St. Paul will now take six verses to share of his and Timothy's prayers for the continuation and growth of those very same gifts.

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1:9 knowledge of His will...spiritual wisdom and understanding: We could interpret this verse and phrase to understand “knowledge” and understanding and information. An experience of the head. But what St. Paul is praying for is not head knowledge but heart experience. St Paul’s focus is on the knowledge of God’s will and on spiritual wisdom, that is, knowing how to apply the truth of God to our daily life. A knowing that fills our hearts and minds so that we can take on, more and more in our lives, the character of Jesus.

1:10 lead a life worthy of the Lord: The Greek word used for “life” or “live” translates literally to “walk”. This was one of St. Paul’s main messages – honor God with the way you live your life, through your daily walk in life. The gift of salvation is free and anyone can receive it. Once received the question is whether the choices we make that life worthy of God and the gift of salvation or not. If we choose to walk in ways that are worthy of the Lord then we will live a life **fully pleasing** to God, and our lives will **bear fruit**, spiritually speaking.

1:11 be strengthened: St. Paul prays not only that the Colossians will know God’s will but will be strengthened **with every power** so that they might be able to carry out God’s will

1:12 the Father, who has qualified us: It is through the grace of divine adoption that makes us worthy of salvation. Christ, in His love for us became man. Through the incarnation we become the adopted sons and daughters of God and heirs to the kingdom of heaven. The **inheritance of the saints?** Salvation in the heavenly kingdom of God. In this verse St. Paul is setting the stage for the conversation they are going to have in chapter two, where he challenges those insist that added practices and beliefs must be supplemented into their lives if they hope to achieve heaven.

1:13-14 He has delivered us: In these last two verses of this section St. Paul summarizes the “good news” of our faith. Most people, even to this day most of life is spiritual neutral, St. Paul though these verses implies that there are two kingdoms – darkness & sin verses light & life. Through the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ we were saved from **the power of the darkness**. Through the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ we were **transferred to the kingdom of His beloved Son**. The mission of the Church from day one has been to call people, to empower people to see, to open their eyes and hearts to see this truth; and then to teach how to live a life worthy of this truth.

Reflection Questions:

1. As we begin this investigation of St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians, what are your hopes for this study?
2. When was the last time you reflected on the gift of faith in your life? Who nurtured that faith in your life? When was the last time you offered prayers of thanksgiving for your faith?
3. In Confirmation the gifts of wisdom and understanding are strengthened. How have you used them to fortify your faith?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Baptism and the Forgiveness of Sins: 2839

Christian Prayer: 2697-2745

Living the Truth: 2465-2470

Prayers of Petition: 2629-2633

Son of God: 238-248

Theological Virtues: 1812-29

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