

#13. THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

1. Paul's letter to the Colossians was written from Rome and is the Apostle's Response to heretical teaching that had begun to surface among Believers in Colosse. At the heart of Paul's correction is a reminder that everything a Believer needs is already found in Christ.
 - It appears that a form of syncretism was weakening the Colossian church. Syncretism is the blending of Christianity with other religious forms. For instance, if a missionary tried to blend elements of Christianity with a popular aboriginal nature religion in order to make the Gospel less offensive to new converts, that would be defined as syncretism. Any such attempt to minimize the "trauma" of conversion is unacceptable to the message of The Kingdom. In the case of Colosse, there seems to be a blend of the Gospel with paganism and various secular philosophies.
 - Although we do not have a systematic delineation of the false doctrine plaguing this church, there were several clues suggesting the core issues of the "Colossian Heresy":
 - **"Spirit is good; Flesh is evil" (1:15-20)** - But God says everything He created was 'good'! There are two ideas regarding 'flesh'. The Greek word for our physical bodies is "soma", and is thought of as being good. The word "sarx" is also translated as flesh, but is used to signify our fallen fleshly nature. In other words, my body is not evil, but my carnal nature is.
 - **"Salvation is achieved by carefully orchestrated good works" (2:11-23; 3:11)** - Paul had already explained to the churches of this region (see Ephesians) that it is "by grace you are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves. Not by works, lest anyone think they have reason for prideful boasting."
 - **"The flesh must be beaten down and punished" (2:20-23)** - Self-flagellation is not effective in dealing with inner evil. Whatever success is achieved usually becomes a source of pride.
 - **"Angels should be worshipped because they are Divine Messengers" (2:18)** - Christ alone is worthy of worship.
 - **"Christ cannot be both human and divine" (1:15-20; 2:2, 3)**—Jesus is fully God and fully man. He is the perfect and complete blending of two distinct natures. He is as much God as if He were not man at all; He is as much man as if He were not God at all. Christ is the full and complete expression of God.

- **“Secret knowledge is available for the spiritually elite” (2:2-18)** - This was at the center of Gnosticism, which taught the “Spiritual Ones (pneumatikoi) were privy to special truth; the “Natural Ones” or “Soulful Ones” were destined to live on a lower level of revelation.
- **“Human wisdom is necessary for salvation” (2:4, 8-10; 3:15-17)** - Paul told the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 2) “Eye has not seen, neither has a human ear heard, neither has it entered into man’s thoughts - the wonderful life God has prepared for those who love Him. They are, however, revealed by the Spirit of God to His Children.”
- **“Syncretism makes religion better” (2:10)** - Christ is sufficient and supreme. There is nothing that needs to be added to His Gospel.
- **“Immorality is not necessarily evil” (3:1-11)** — Though the flesh was considered evil, Gnostics excused sensual indulgences because they were committed “by the flesh, not the spirit”. Gnostics reasoned that there was no true guilt attached to carnal living.
- In Colossians, we see Jesus presented as fully sufficient and absolutely in control of each Christian’s life. There are similarities to the message of the Ephesians, but from a corrective point of view.

2. **Authorship and date** - Paul wrote the epistle (1:1, 23; 4:18) in 61-62AD during his imprisonment in Rome.

- Paul was connected to the Church in Colosse only indirectly. Epaphras, a convert of Paul, appears to be the founder of the church. The mention of Timothy, Aristarchus, Mark, Archippus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas and Onesimus appear in both Colossians and Philemon indicating that both letters had the same author and were written at about the same time.

3. **Paul’s emphasis** is clearly on the preeminence of Christ in all things. There is no room for other god, philosophy or source in the lives of Christians.

4. Key Chapter

- There is no dominant chapter in Colossians. In its brief four chapters, Paul makes the case that Jesus paid for our sin, reconciled us back to God, and has given us spiritual power to grow in grace and become more like Christ. Because Christ is the head of this

spiritual body, we should be diligent to develop our spiritual connection to Him.

5. Key Verse

- **Colossians 2:9, 10 NIV** - "For in Christ, all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority."

6. Key People

- **Paul** - The founding pastor in Ephesus. Epaphras was converted by Paul while in Ephesus, and returned home to Colosse to establish a sister church in that city.
- **Luke** - Paul's personal physician and fellow missionary. The author of Luke and Acts.
- **Timothy** - Paul's son in the faith, who was instrumental in the establishing and strengthening of churches in the area.
- **Mark** - John Mark, a companion of Paul on his First Missionary Journey, as well as other ministry opportunities near the end of Paul's life.
- **Tychichus, Onesimus, Archippus, and Aristarchus** - men whose interaction with Paul in this region greatly assisted the apostle in establishing churches. Onesimus was the runaway slave who was the object of Paul's letter to Philemon. Aristarchus of Thessalonica was seized by a riotous mob in Ephesus. Archippus was most likely the son of Philemon (Philemon 2). Tychichus was one of the Gentile Believers Paul took to Jerusalem as a representative of God's work among non-Jewish people (Acts 20:4). He was a very capable man who was often used in the place of Timothy and Titus (2 Timothy 4:12 and Titus 3:12).

7. Key Places -

- **Colosse** - A city in Phrygia (Asia Minor; modern Turkey), about 100 miles east of Ephesus. In Esther's day, Colosse was a thriving town, but by Paul's day the major trade route had been re-routed, making Laodicea and Hierapolis the more important and prosperous communities. Colosse was primarily Gentile, but had a significant number of Jews as well.
- **Hierapolis** - a Phrygian city about 20 miles west of Colosse and 6 miles north of

Laodicea.

- **Laodicea** - This was the site of a neighboring church intended to receive the same epistle as the Colossians. Laodicea is also mentioned as one of the seven special church of Revelation (Revelation 3).

8. Key Themes -

- **Jesus is God** - Paul wanted the Colossians to understand clearly that Jesus is more than a good man. He is more than the 'best man'. He is the God-Man. He is not half and half, but is the complete expression of God. Jesus is fully God and fully man. He is the blending of two distinct natures. He is as much God as if He were not man at all; He is as much man as if He were not God at all. Christ is the full and complete expression of God.
- **Jesus is the Head of the Church** - Christ is the Founder, and Leader of His Church. The Book of Revelation portrays Him as the "Alpha and Omega", the "Beginning and the End."
- **Jesus is our Life-Source** - "In Him we live, and move, and have our very existence". John 15 points out that He is the Vine, and we are branches connected to Him, drawing life from Him.
- **Jesus is our Absolute Authority** - Because of these previous facts, no religion or philosophy rises above the teachings of Jesus. He is Lord over all!

9. The Contents of Philippians -

- Greetings to the Church (1:1-14)
 - Greetings from Paul (1:1,2)
 - Paul's thankfulness (1:3-8)
 - Paul's prayer for the Colossians (1:9-14)
- **The Work of Christ - Doctrinal Instruction (1:15-2:23)**
 - The Deity of Christ (1:15-23)

- Paul's Apostolic Ministry (1:24-2:7)
- Paul's warnings about false doctrine (2:8-23)
- **The Walk of Christians - A Call to Holy Living (3:1-4:18)**
 - A word about holy living (3:1-17)
 - A word about Christian homes (3:18-4:1)
 - A word about Christian speech (4:2-6)
- **Paul's Circle of Friends (4:7-18)**

Worth noting about Colossians:

- Paul focuses on the "Preeminence of Christ" -
 - In all creation - He is God (1:15); He is Creator (1:16); He Sustains all life (1:17); He is the Head of the Church (1:18).
 - In Salvation - he is the agent of The Father (1:19, 20); His death is the source of redemption (1:21, 22); His life in us is our guarantee of immortality (1:27).
 - In wisdom - He is the source of all spiritual wisdom (2:2, 3); He is greater than worldly knowledge, wisdom and philosophy (2:8).
 - In Quality Living - We have our life in Him (3:3); We live holy lives by His power (3:5-14).
- Colossians makes a clear, bold declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord of Creation, the Church, and in eternity.

When reading Colossians:

- Remember that the Colossian congregation is most Gentile.

- Though He has never been to Colosse, Paul considers the church one of his own since it was established by Epaphras, a convert of his while at Ephesus.
- The problems in Colosse seem to have a distinctly Jewish flavor on one hand, but reflect pagan philosophic thought on the other. As with most cults, the two points of controversy revolved around (1) the identity of Christ, and (2) how to live a life that pleases God. During a train ride from Chicago to the west coast, D.L. Moody listened for hours as a member of another religion explained how to live a holy life. Moody's conclusion was as follows: "My friend, all you have said can be summarized thusly: Your religion is spelled D-O. My religion is spelled D-O-N-E. Your life will be spent trying to do good deeds, while my life rejoices in the work Christ has already finished."