COLOSSIANS INTRODUCTION

Major Theme: The Doctrine of Christ [Christology] and Salvation [Soteriology].

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross……..For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.—Col. 1:15-20; 2:9-10

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight…….If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.—Col. 1:21-22; 3:1-4

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**AUTHORSHIP:**
The Apostle Paul with possible contributions from Timothy [Col. 1:1].

**DATE:** ~60 AD, After Paul’s Third Missionary Journey, toward the middle of his two-year imprisonment at Rome [Acts 28:30-31] around the time of writing Philippians, possibly before.

**PLACE OF WRITING:**
Prison [Col. 4:3, 10, 18] but Paul does not indicate where he was imprisoned. Caesarea and Ephesus have been suggested, but the most probable place is Rome [Acts 28:30]. Thus, along with Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon, this letter was a “prison epistle”.

A man by the name of Epaphras must have heard Paul in Ephesus and then carried the gospel to Colossae (1:7-8; 4:12-13) and became the founding pastor of the church of believers there. Evidently, Paul chose to send Tychicus, Onesimus and Epaphras (4:7-9, 12) back to Colossae with this letter (and apparently another one to Laodicea as well (4:16)).

**PURPOSE:**
False teaching was confronting the Colossians and Paul needed to “nip this in the bud” before it had a chance to blossom, fruit and “go to seed”.

Paul references a “sister” city, Laodicea, in Col. 2:1 and states that he has the same concern of doctrinal purity for that city as well.

There is also a reference to Laodicea in Col. 4:13-16 with the request; “Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.” This not only indicates that this letter was also intended for the Laodiceans, but that there was a letter to them that we no longer have a copy of.

Evidently, church at Laodicea did not heed the warnings of Paul for it is later condemned by Christ Jesus as being “…..neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot” and because of this He says, “So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” [Rev. 3:15-16].

The epistle is thus a strong polemic against early Judaic-Gnostic heresy with its ceremonialism, celestial beings and doctrine of emanations. These unsound teachings sought to reduce Christianity to a legal system and Christ to the position of a lesser god.

Paul directed the impact of revealed truth against the Jewish element (circumcision, meats, drinks, fast days, new moons, and Sabbaths; 2:11-16), an ascetic element (2:20-23), and a false philosophical and speculative element (2:8), with the worship of intermediary beings (2:18-19).

Apparently, Epaphras and his colleagues were unable to handle this situation and went to Rome to consult Paul about it (1:7-8). The letter of reply was sent with Tychicus, Onesimus and Epaphras (4:7-9, 12) toward the middle of Paul's two-year imprisonment at Rome, about A.D. 60.

These teaching combined Jewish observances (2:16) and pagan speculation (2:8); it is possible that this resulted in an early form of Gnosticism. This teaching pretended to add to or improve upon the gospel that, indirectly at least, had come from Paul. Some of the additions Paul mentions are feasts and observances, some of them related to Astrology (2:16), plus a list of rules (2:20). These practices were then included within a philosophy in which angels played a leading role (2:18); Paul calls this philosophy "the basic principles of the world" (2:8).
Note that the letter to Philemon which contains instructions concerning Onesimus was probably written and sent at the same time as Colossians.

**HISTORICAL & CULTURAL SETTING:**

Colossae was an ancient city of Phrygia located in the Lycus River Valley (a tributary of the Maeander River) of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) near ancient Hierapolis, about 12 miles North of another ancient city, Laodicea and about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Note that both Hierapolis and Laodicea are mentioned by Paul in Col. 4:13. And Laodicea was the last of the Seven Churches addressed by Jesus Christ in Rev. 1:11; 3:14-22.

All three of these cities [Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis] benefited from being on or near a major East-West trading route that ran from Ephesus on the western shore of modern Turkey all the way to the Euphrates River in modern Iraq. Other advantages included fertile pastures for raising sheep and producing wool as well as chalk deposits useful for dyeing cloth. A devastating earthquake in 60 AD sealed Colossae’s fate and it never recovered its previous significance.

Colossae was a pluralistic city with Greek, Jewish, and native Phrygian residents as well as members of the Roman army. Many believe that the doctrinal issues Paul needed to address reflected the philosophical backgrounds associated with this pluralistic population. The false teaching took two forms: (1) Gnostic mysticism which involved an exaltation of elemental spirits or angels whom people perceived to be necessary intermediaries between God and humanity and (2) Judaistic legalism which involved the rigid observance of rituals, dietary rules and astronomical cycles.

Both of these heresies were deadly to the spiritual health and proclamation of the Gospel for they emptied Christ of His preeminence and ultimate authority as both Creator and Savior. In chapter 1 of his letter, Paul would clearly and firmly expose the fallacy of these heresies and reaffirm the Truth about the Person and Work of Christ Jesus.

Similar to the city of Philippi, Colossae was the site of a historic death. In 396 B.C., during the Persian Wars, the Persian governor Tissaphernes was lured to Colossae and slain by an agent of the rival party of Cyrus the Younger.

Pliny tells that the wool of Colossae gave its name (colossinus) to the color of the cyclamen flower which is typically purple. During the Hellenistic period, the town was of some mercantile importance, although by the first century it had dwindled greatly in size and significance.

Written to a Christian community in Colossae {perhaps ‘house churches’ Col. 1:2; 4:15} as well to Laodicea {Col. 4:16} which he probably had not visited {Col. 2:1} although Paul had established a resident ministry in Ephesus, 100 miles west of Colossae.

For more than two years the influence of his ministry reached “all who dwelt in Asia” {Acts 19:10}. Epaphras must have heard Paul in Ephesus and then carried the gospel to Colossae {Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13} and founded the church of believers there.

The site of ancient Colossae is located near the modern town of Honaz in Turkey but has never been excavated.
THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION:

In many ways, the church at Colossae existed in an environment like 21st-century America. A key term in understanding the background for the letter is *syncretism*, a term referring to a system or collection of thoughts drawn from various sources. The Colossians drew from a number of philosophies and religions and tried to cram together often opposing teachings. This scattered approach produced a theology that was both unfocused and dangerously erroneous.

In the opening section of the Letter to the Colossians, Paul laid a careful foundation for addressing the heresy threatening the church at Colossae. In this letter we find all the usual components of one of Paul's Letters, but we can also detect his determined effort to focus the church on Jesus Christ as Lord. Paul reminded the Colossians that their salvation was based on their faith in Christ (Col. 1:4-5), and that He is the Messiah (1:7). He saved them from darkness (1:13). This emphasis serves a specific purpose. If their salvation came through Jesus Christ, then their focus must be on Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus should be neither a theological addendum nor a springboard of their belief because He is the sum and substance of true Christianity.

To that end, we find the hymn to Christ (1:15-20) that contains deep truths about Jesus and soars in its description of His identity and work. Paul came to this theological high point early in this letter, and the reason must be because of the theological uncertainty in and around the Colossian church. The Colossian believers had learned the truth most likely through Epaphras, but they risked spiritual ruin if they failed to advance in their knowledge of Jesus.

The church today exists in the same kind of background. Culturally, we live in an environment that allows and encourages the free exchange of all ideas. The challenge for the Christian is to sift through all the truth-claims and measure them against the truth of Jesus Christ.

Paul unmasks the false teaching as “empty deceit... of men” (2:8), having the “appearance of wisdom” (2:23), but whose teaching is useless in fact. He declared that the addition of such things dilutes rather than strengthens the faith (2:20).

But Paul does more than denounce false teaching. The best medicine is a firm grip on who Jesus Christ is and what He did for our salvation. In Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3), and “in Him all fullness dwells” (1:19). In fact, “He is the image of the invisible God” (1:15). He has “stripped every power opposed to Him” (2:15), “wiped out every accusation against us” (2:14), and actually “reconciled all things to Himself” (1:20). He is not only head of the church (1:18); but He stands before all time and above every power, and at the end of all history (1:16).

This beautiful epistle on the majesty of Jesus Christ speaks to us today as much as it did to the Colossians when they first heard it! It reminds us that Jesus Christ is sufficient for every need and is still the most powerful force in the world and the universe for that matter!

**Bibliography**

