

# Study 1: Introduction to Colossians

## **Introduction**

Colossians in many ways parallels the Ephesian letter with the emphasis on Christ and His pre-eminent position. The churches were geographically and culturally similar, and the letters were written close to the same time.

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## **Body of the Study**

**Background of Colosse**

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## **Homework and preparation for next week:**

*Read the whole book in a single sitting, and a few days later read chapter 1 again.*

*Read the notes as a review of the study*

*Review the introduction and conclusion, (pages 5 and 6 of the notes) and find the key words & thoughts. Put these together into a “story” to find the key things that Paul wants to tell us about the letter.*

*Count how many times there are references to Christ (“in Christ” “in Him” “in whom” etc) in each chapter, and how many references to “faith” “faithful” etc in each chapter. What does this tell you about what Paul wants them to know – ie what is the key message?*

*If you have them, read the notes from the “summary” study.*

## Notes for study 1: Introduction to Colossians

Colossians in many ways parallels the Ephesian letter with the emphasis on Christ and His pre-eminent position. The churches were geographically and culturally similar, and the letters were written close to the same time.

Apparently Paul had never visited the church at Colosse, although he had knowledge of what was happening there from his many visitors.

### **Background of Colosse**

Colosse lay in the valley of the Lycus River in the western part of Asia Minor (what is now Turkey), about 150 km from both Ephesus and Pisidia.

The church is close to the “seven churches of Asia” described in Revelation, and had a similar culture. In New Testament times, it was a city of little importance, although in previous history it had held some esteem. It was the least important city of any New Testament letter, but the people in all places (large or small) are important to God. The area of Asia Minor had been the Hittite heartland for around 500 years (from 1750 BC to 1200 BC). Around 1000 BC it came under Ionian influence, and hence acquired the Greek language and culture. The region came under Persian control around 550 BC, but the Asians found them to be hard taskmasters, and a revolt began in Miletus in 499 BC supported by Athens. The Persians retaliated by invading Greece, and were defeated in the battle of Marathon. The Persians were turned back into Asia Minor. Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in 334 BC. Consequently the whole of Asia Minor came under Alexander’s control. The Seleucids (a line of Greek Kings) ruled Asia Minor after Alexander’s death in 323 BC, until they were defeated by the Romans around 150 BC.

So, by the time of the New Testament, the whole region had a strong Greek language and culture, but was under Roman rule.



“Colosse was a small market town situated on the south bank of the Lycus River in the interior of the Roman province of Asia (an area included in modern Turkey). Located about a hundred miles east of Ephesus, its nearest neighbors were Laodicea and Hierapolis (both of these cities had communities of believers; cf. 2:1; 4:13). Colosse and Laodicea were probably evangelized during the time of Paul's extended ministry in Ephesus (Ac 19:10), though there is no record of it in Acts. All our information about the church must be found in this letter and in incidental allusions in the companion letter to Philemon.” (NIVBC).

We have no specific knowledge of Paul having visited Colosse. If he did visit, then it would have been on his fourth journey – the one that occurred after his first Roman imprisonment and after the close of the Acts narrative (and after the letter was written). It is possible that he made a visit during the third journey, on the way to Ephesus, or during his stay there. If he did, then Luke tells us nothing about it, and such a visit would seem unlikely given what Paul says in the letter.

Paul certainly did have some contact with the church. His helper Epaphras had evangelised the city most likely during Paul's extended time in Ephesus, for during this time "...all of Asia heard the word..." (Acts 19:10), and they had "...heard the truth of the gospel ... as you also learned from Epaphras..." (1:5,7)

Paul tells us that he was "...unknown by face..." to many of the brethren (2:1), and that he had learned of the faith of the Colossian brethren by report (1:4)

### ***The background to the church at Colosse***

The beginnings of the church are unknown but most likely occurred during Paul's stay in Ephesus on the third journey. This would place the time between 54 and 57 AD.

Clearly the church has a knowledge and an interest in Paul's affairs, even though he is far away from them.

The area of the Lycus valley was quite wealthy, their wealth being built from wool and dyeing, two industries that go hand in hand. Jesus says of the neighbouring Laodicean church that in their own eyes they were "...rich, and had want of nothing..." (Rev 3:17) Although the real state of the Laodicean church was far different, we can well assume that the physical state of the Colossian brethren was no different.

### ***Date and Occasion of the Letter***

The Colossian letter is clearly one of the *Prison Epistles*. Paul talks about his *fellow prisoner Aristarchus* (4:10), and asks to be *remembered in his chains* (4:18). Paul was imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16), and it was certainly not at this time that he wrote the letter. He was also imprisoned in Caesarea, and there is little evidence to suggest that it was from here that he wrote. He was also imprisoned in Rome, and it is from the first Roman imprisonment that the letter is placed. As evidence for this, Paul discusses several of his visitors: Timothy was with him (1:1), and Epaphras had come to visit (1:7-8). Tychicus was with him (4:7) as was Onesimus (1:9) who was a slave from Colosse who had run away from his master Philemon (more on this when we study the letter to Philemon). Epaphras was from Colosse (4:12), and had taught them the gospel at the beginning (1:7). Luke was with him (4:14) along with Demas (who was later to leave and forsake Paul – 2 Tim 4:10), and there were many others.

This all fits the pattern of the time of the first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:30-31), which places the date of the letter at 62-63 AD, almost certainly late in the period.

The letter to the church at Colosse and the letter to Philemon were both written together, and both delivered by Epaphras at the same time. In the letter to Philemon, Paul says that he expects to come there very soon, and Philemon is to *prepare the guestroom* accordingly (Phm 22). This would not be the case if the letters were written early during the two-year imprisonment.

Conybeare & Howson note concerning the *Philippian* letter that "... It was written towards the conclusion of this first imprisonment, because (A) he expects the immediate decision of his cause; (B) Enough time had elapsed for the Philippians to hear of his imprisonment, send Epaphroditus to him, hear of Epaphroditus's arrival and sickness, and send back word to Rome of their distress (2:26)...". Also "...It was written *after* Colossians and Philemon; both for the preceding reason, and because Luke was no longer at Rome, as he was when those were written; otherwise he would have *saluted* a church in which he had laboured, and would have 'cared in earnest for their concerns' (2:20)..."<sup>1</sup>

This places the date of the Colossian letter quite late in the second year of Paul's Roman imprisonment in AD 62 / 63.

The occasion of the letter is the arrival of Onesimus in Rome, and probably about the same time, the arrival of Epaphras with news of things in the churches in the Lycus valley. Onesimus had run

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<sup>1</sup> Conybeare & Howson, p.725.

away from his master Philemon, and come to Paul. Both Onesimus and Philemon were Christians, and Paul writes the letter to Philemon to ensure that he does not unduly punish Onesimus. Along with the letter to Philemon, he writes the letter to the church, and sends them both by way of Tychicus (4:7-8).

The letter contains warnings, both about the problems of the Judaizers, but also about Gnosticism (Gnostic means “to know”; so the Gnostics were saying that they have and seek knowledge. Likewise, “agnostic” means “I don’t know”). The Colossians were also embracing the worship of angels, and the letter addresses this issue by clear teaching on the nature of the Godhead and Christ. Bruce writes “While the Colossian heresy was basically Jewish, it is not the straightforward Judaizing legalism of Galatians that is envisaged in Colossians, but a form of mysticism which tempted its adepts to look on themselves as a spiritual elite.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***Gnosticism: Background to the Letter***

Gnosticism grew strongly in the second century, but the beginnings of it were evident by the mid first century, and it influences the Corinthian letters, as well as the Pastoral Epistles. Roberts describes Gnosticism<sup>3</sup>:

“...it is also applied to the general tendency which seems to have existed among the fringe Jewish groups and influenced the Christian churches as early as Corinthians and the Prison and Pastoral epistles. The term comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, “knowledge.” Members of the group held that they possessed a special revealed knowledge which was deeper and more genuine than that held by ordinary Christians. This knowledge had been delivered by Christ to special disciples and emerged in teachings and writings which had not been generally known among the churches. In theology they were dualistic, holding that the world was created by a lesser deity, who was a fallen spirit (generally identified with the Jehovah of the Old Testament). Man’s body was of matter, which was evil, and only because divine spirit had been breathed into him by God did he escape being wholly evil. Sin was defined mainly as ignorance of man’s condition, and the knowledge needed for man’s redemption was the Gnostic gospel. When the Gnostic was baptized, he spiritually experienced the “resurrection” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 23, 5) and became otherworldly so that the bodily resurrection was denied and sin was held to be a matter of indifference (*Ibid.*, I, 24,5). At death the knowledge gained in the Gnostic system allowed the spirit to return to the spirit world, called the *pleroma* or “fulness.” There was a tendency to asceticism (due to the idea that flesh or the body was evil and should be abused), which included abstaining from meats and wine and marriage. And somewhat in the opposite direction, it was argued that even licentious living meant nothing to those who had already gone beyond sin (*Ibid.*, I, 25,3).

Whilst some of the terms used here may be “technical”, the thrust of the Gnostic belief can be easily identified. It is to precisely this backdrop that all of John’s epistles were written.

However, we have noted that it was not just Gnosticism, but an amalgam that appeared to embrace angel worship. Carson<sup>4</sup> adds:

“The resultant religious amalgam is an attempt to advance beyond apostolic Christianity. There is no suggestion that Christ is openly rejected. He still has a place; but only as one among many angelic powers. Indeed Paul’s emphasis on the primacy of Christ would suggest that the false teachers did not even put Him as *primus inter pares*. They do seem to admit that He has delivered His people from sin, but they still have to wage the battle against the cosmic powers; and in this they need ... the help of angelic powers, and initiation into the knowledge which brings not only enlightenment but also salvation.”

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce, p22

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Carson, p.17

## ***The style of the letter***

The style is very much that of the writings of Paul, and parallels the Ephesian letter in many ways. It is not characterised by the *friendship letter* style of Philippians, but Paul clearly knows many of the brethren, and regards the church there as one for which he has personal concern (c/f 2 Cor 11:28).

There are four things that stand out in the letter as we study through it:

1. *Dealing with the false teaching.* We don't know precisely what the false doctrines were, and a lot of material has been written about it, which is usually referred to as the Colossian *Syncretism* because it represents a *blending* of a variety of religious beliefs, doctrines, and philosophy. As we study the letter, we will see Paul's *response* to the problem, and we will have to try to second-guess what the problem actually is.
2. *The primary emphasis on the supremacy of Christ* over all things. This is Paul's response to the problem – the antidote!
3. *The situation in the church* emerges, and we need to note the way in which he encourages the brethren, even although he hasn't been there.
4. *The situation with Onesimus* underlies the whole letter, and so Paul is conditioning the church to receive him back, just as does with the letter to his master, Philemon.

## ***Outline of the letter***

The following outline is taken from Fee & Stuart<sup>5</sup>

- 1:1- 14 *Salutation, Thanksgiving, and Prayer*
- 1:15-23 *The Supremacy of the Son of God*
- 1:24-2:5 *Paul's Role*
- 2:6 - 23 *Christ over against Religious Seductions of All Kinds*
- 3:1- 11 *The New Basis for (Christian) Behavior*
- 3:12 - 4:6 *What Christian Life Looks Like*
- 4:7 - 18 *Final Greetings*

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<sup>5</sup> Fee & Stuart, p.359

## ***Selected Bibliography***

The following references will be used and quoted from during the studies. The full reference of the books are quoted here, and only their abbreviated title and page number will be quoted in the studies.

### **Bruce**

Bruce, F.F.: “The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to  
The COLOSSIANS, to PHILEMON, and to the EPHESIANS  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI. ISBN: 0-8028-2510-9

### **Carson**

Carson, Herbert M. “Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: COLOSSIANS and PHILEMON”  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI. ISBN: 0-85111-861-5

### **Cogdill**

Cogdill, Roy E: “The New Testament: Book by Book – A 26 Lesson Outline series covering  
the entire New Testament”  
Cogdill Foundation Publications, P.O. Box 403 Marion Ind. 46952

### **Fee & Stuart**

Gordon D Fee & Douglas Stuart: “How to Read the Bible Book by Book”  
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 49530 ISBN 0-310-21118-2

### **Johnston**

Johnston, Paul F. “The Church in Colosse: Fort Worth Christian College Lectures, March 1963”

### **Roberts**

Roberts, J.W: “The letters of John” The Living Word Commentary  
R. B. Sweet Co.; Inc. Austin, Tx

### **Weed**

Weed, Michael R: “The Letters of Paul to the Ephesians, the Colossians, and Philemon”  
The Living Word Commentary,  
Sweet Publishing Company, Austin Texas ISBN 0-8344-0055-3

### **Conybeare & Howson**

Conybeare WJ & Howson JS “The Life & Epistles of St Paul”  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI ISBN0-8028-8086-X

## **Key points – Introduction & Conclusion**

By looking at the introduction and conclusion to the letter, we can derive some of the key thoughts that Paul wants to bring out to the readers – especially when they appear in both the introduction and the conclusion.

Take some time to circle the key thoughts in each section, and then link the common ones together. The keys to the introduction are Paul's use of *And you, brethren...* and his beginning of the conclusion with a discussion of his "travel plans" – in this case his sending of Tychius ... Quotation is taken from the NIV

COL 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

COL 1:2 To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

COL 1:3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-- <sup>5</sup>the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup> that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. <sup>7</sup> You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup> and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

COL 1:9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. <sup>10</sup> And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup>being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. <sup>13</sup> For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

COL 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. <sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

COL 1:21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ...

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COL 4:7 Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. <sup>8</sup> I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. <sup>9</sup> He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

COL 4:10 My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) <sup>11</sup> Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. <sup>12</sup> Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. <sup>13</sup> I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. <sup>14</sup> Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. <sup>15</sup> Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

COL 4:16 After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

COL 4:17 Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord."

COL 4:18 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.



## ***Comparison of Ephesians and Colossians***