

The Book of Colossians - Chapter 1

Chapter 1:1-14

The Epistle to the Colossians is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the Christian church in Colosse, a town in Asia Minor. It contains one of the most powerful presentations of the doctrine of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures.

Inspiration, and Text

Colossians is part of the Bible, which is the inspired Word of God. The book claims apostolic authority from the very first verse. Chapter 2 issues an authoritative warning against a particular heresy and a refutation of it. Chapter 4 commands that the letter be circulated among Christians outside Colosse and read by them. If we accept Paul as a genuine apostle and if we accept Colossians as a genuine book by him, then we must accept its claims to be authoritative and recognize that it is inspired of God for us. According to II Peter 3:15-16, the epistles of Paul are Scripture.

Author

Since the Book of Colossians is part of the inspired Word of God, in the final analysis God is the true author of the book. God did use a human agent to compose the book, and according to Colossians 1:1, 23-24 that human author was Paul. Paul, whose Hebrew name was Saul, was a very devout, highly educated Jew (Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:4-6). He originally persecuted the Christians bitterly, but after a miraculous conversion experience he began to preach the gospel he once opposed. He received his apostolic calling from God and his understanding of the gospel by divine revelation (Galatians 1:1, 11-12). He became the chief apostle to the Gentiles, the greatest missionary of the early church, and writer of much of the New Testament. Acts 9, 22 records Paul's conversion, while Acts 13-28 records his ministry.

Date and Place of Writing

Paul wrote Colossians from prison (Colossians 4:3, 18). Thus the book is classified along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon as one of Paul's Prison Epistles. Most conservative Bible scholars conclude that Colossians was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16, 30-31), which occurred in the early A.D. 60s, probably from 61 to 63.

Original Recipients

The book was originally written to the church at Colosse (or Colossae), a city in the Roman province of Asia. This province encompassed western Asia Minor, or western Anatolia (the Asian portion of modern Turkey). The city was located in the Lycus River valley about 125 miles south of Ephesus, the provincial capital. Colosse was formerly part of the kingdom of Phrygia. The majority of the inhabitants were Phrygians, with Greek culture being superimposed. There was a large Jewish community in the Lycus valley and in Phrygia. (See Acts 2:10.) It appears that the Colossian church was mainly Gentile, but some Jewish influence was evident.

Purpose

The immediate occasion of the Colossian letter was (1) the visit and report of Epaphras, the founder and pastor of the church, to Paul and (2) the return of Onesimus, a runaway slave converted by Paul, to Colosse. The purpose of the letter was (1) to strengthen and confirm the Colossian church and (2) to warn about and refute the particular heresy in its midst. The use of the singular in chapter 2 may indicate that one false teacher was particularly responsible for the doctrinal problems. By inspiring the book, God evidently had a larger purpose in mind, namely, instructing the entire church throughout the centuries in the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Colossians 4:16 indicates this larger purpose by instructing that the Laodicean church also read the letter.

Consequently, the Book of Colossians contains the most comprehensive Christology, or doctrine of Jesus Christ, in all of Paul's epistles, and it makes

some of the most important statements on the subject in the entire Bible. It clearly presents Jesus Christ as the full incarnation of the one true God, and it does so in a way that is incompatible with trinitarianism.

We can divide the main body of Colossians into four major points, all centered around the lordship of Jesus Christ.

1. *The doctrine of Jesus Christ* (1:15-23): the nature of the lordship of Jesus.
2. *Paul as a minister of Jesus* (1:24-2:5): proclaiming the lordship of Jesus.
3. *False philosophy versus true faith* (2:6-3:4): the lordship of Jesus versus the false teaching at Colosse.
4. *Practical Christian living* (3:5-4:6): the lordship of Jesus in practical life.

Greetings (1:1-2)

(1) Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, (2) to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 1. Paul identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. An apostle is literally someone who is sent, or a messenger. Although Paul did not claim to be one of the Twelve (I Corinthians 15:5), by using this title he claimed an authority and ministry like theirs.

Paul was an apostle by divine calling. No mere mortal could give him this ministry; he received it from God Himself (Galatians 1:1, 15-16).

Although other associates were with Paul at the time (Colossians 4:10-14), only Timothy was included in the salutation, because he was Paul's permanent co-worker. While the greetings are from both Paul and Timothy, the epistle itself is actually from Paul and is based on his apostolic authority.

The title of "brother" here and in verse 2 reveals the close family relationship that Christians enjoy; it was apparently a standard title in the early church. The Greek text simply identifies Timothy as "the brother."

Verse 2. Paul wrote to the church at Colosse. He described the Christians they're as "faithful," which can mean loyal, believing, or both. He also called them "saints," which literally means separated, sanctified ones or holy ones. The New Testament uses this term for all believers; all believers are to be separated from sin and dedicated to God.

Thanksgiving for the Colossians (1:3-8)

(3) We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, (4) since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, (5) for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; (6) which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: (7) as ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; (8) who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit.

Verse 3. After the initial greeting, Paul described his continual thanksgiving for the Colossian believers as he prayed for them. Not only did this gesture demonstrate courtesy, but it also illustrated an important truth about prayer: prayer should always be offered in the context of thanksgiving and not just as a series of petitions.

Paul prayed continually for the Colossians. Prayer was his daily habit. He believed in the power of prayer, specifically intercessory prayer.

Paul directed his thanks to "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (NKJV). Just as the Old Testament speaks of "the God of Abraham" to remind His people of the relationship and blessings resulting from the Abrahamic covenant, so the New Testament sometimes speaks of "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ" to remind us of the relationship and blessings available to us through the new covenant established by the atoning work of Jesus.

Verse 4 presents two reasons for Paul's thanksgiving. First, he thanked God for the *faith* of the Colossians. Faith in Jesus Christ is vital, for it is the very basis of salvation (Romans 1:16-17).

Second, Paul thanked God for the *love* that the Colossians had for fellow Christians. Loving the brethren is the supreme abiding evidence of salvation (John 13:34-35). Thus Paul was thankful that the Colossian believers exhibited the two essential aspects of Christian life: faith and love, salvation and godliness.

Verse 5. Faith and love rest upon or springs from our future hope. This hope is objective, not subjective: it is already stored up for us in heaven. Verse 27 calls it "the hope of glory," which comes by the indwelling Christ. Specifically, we have the hope of the Second Coming of Christ and an eternal reward from Him. This hope comes through the preaching of the truth of the gospel. Verse 23 calls it the "hope of the gospel."

Verse 6 expounds on the nature of the gospel that brings such hope. First, it is *universal*; it has come to the Colossians and to the entire world.

Second, the gospel is *productive*; it is bearing fruit. The gospel was working in or among the saints since they heard and knew the grace of God in truth.

The gospel, or grace of God, cannot merely be accepted intellectually; it must be grasped spiritually and then transformed into experience.

The Colossians received the grace of God "in truth": there was no adulteration. As this verse speaks of the entire world receiving the gospel truth, which must be unadulterated and comprehended fully.

Verse 7. The gospel came to the Colossians via Epaphras. "You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant" (NIV). Apparently, he was the founder and pastor of the church as Paul's co-worker. Paul described him as a fellow slave and a minister (servant, helper) of Christ.

Verse 8. Epaphras had reported to Paul the spiritual love of the Colossian believers. Some translations say "love in the Spirit" while others say "love in

spirit.” Either way, the meaning is the same, for the indwelling Holy Spirit prompted their love. Taking the KJV rendering, this verse contains the only explicit reference to the Spirit in the entire epistle. This fact may pose a problem for trinitarians but not for Oneness believers, for they recognize with Paul that the Holy Spirit is synonymous with the indwelling Christ (Romans 8:9-11; II Corinthians 3:17; Colossians 1:27).

Prayer for the Colossians (1:9-14)

(9) For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; (10) that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; (11) strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; (12) giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: (13) who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: (14) in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.

Verse 9. Paul’s prayer was based on the same reason as his thanksgiving: the good report motivated him to pray for the Colossians as well as to offer thanks for them. In fact, he prayed continually for them.

We can divide Paul’s prayer for the believers into two parts. (1) He prayed that they would *be filled with the knowledge of God’s will*. The word for “knowledge” is not merely *gnosis*, but *epignosis*, meaning, “full knowledge.” His prayer request was that they would have a deeper understanding.

God’s will is not obscure or mystical; this verse shows that Christians can and should obtain a full knowledge of God’s will for their lives.

The deeper understanding that Paul desired for the church consisted of wisdom and spiritual (not carnal) understanding. In this context, these words signify the full knowledge of spiritual principles and the ability to

apply those principles. As chapter 2 shows, the false teaching at Colosse put heavy emphasis on knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. It appears that God inspired Paul to use terms popular with the heretics in order to refute their false concepts.

Verse 10. The purpose of knowledge is transformation, or right conduct. There is and must be a union of doctrine and conduct. Christians are to walk, or live, in a worthy manner. We are not worthy of God's grace, but in response to His grace and through the power of His grace, we must strive to live up to our Lord's standards.

The specific results of knowledge are twofold: (a) *bearing fruit* in every good work and (b) *growing in full knowledge*. True spiritual knowledge causes us to bear fruit (produce good works) and grow further in the knowledge of God's will.

Verse 11. (2) Paul also prayed that the believers would *receive power to do God's will*. He referred primarily to strength of will or strength of character, including power to deny the flesh, refuse temptation, and resist the devil. God will endow us with all strength according to His glorious power

Spiritual strength produces three characteristics.

1. *Patience*: endurance, or patience that conquers obstacles.
2. *Long-suffering*: patience especially with people.
3. *Joyfulness*: rejoicing, especially in times of tribulation. Having joy in trials is an important Christian attitude.

Verse 12. Once again, Paul offered thanks to God. His prayer was in the context of thanksgiving. The reason for thanksgiving in this verse is that the Father has qualified us for a share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Verse 13 further explains that the Father has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His Son. The Greek literally reads, "the Son of His love," indicating God's love for the Son as a man and God's love for us as revealed through the Son.

Verse 14 explains how we were placed in the Lord's kingdom: by redemption. Redemption means deliverance, release, and emancipation. This verse compares us to captives who have been ransomed by a payment. We have redemption in the Son, the man Christ Jesus who died for us. The ransom payment was the blood of Jesus, which satisfied the requirements of God's holy law and thereby delivered us from the penalty and effects of sin. The blood of Jesus is His life given up in death—His substitutionary, atoning sacrifice for us.

Verse 14 is an amplification of verse 13, and the one acting in verse 13 is the Father. Deliverance, translation, and redemption are actually the work of the Father. The One who delivers and the One who redeems are not two separate persons but one divine being. The Father was incarnate in the Son and thereby reconciled the world to Himself (John 14:10; II Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:20). The Father did not send someone else; He gave of Himself. (See John 3:16.)

Christ's redemptive work enables us to receive the forgiveness of sins. Paul typically spoke of salvation in terms of justification—being declared righteous by God. Justification includes both the removal of sin (forgiveness/ remission) and the imputation of righteousness. Forgiveness focuses on one aspect of the initial salvation experience, whereas justification is a more comprehensive term. We receive the full work of forgiveness/remission at repentance and water baptism (Acts 2:38), while justification also involves the work of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:11). The new birth experience of the New Testament church includes both water and Spirit (John 3:3, 5); namely, it consists of repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus, and receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

The wording of Colossians 1:13-14 is similar to God's commission to Paul as recorded in Acts 26:18. God called Paul "to turn [the Gentiles] from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." God is the one who performs this work as the gospel is preached and people believe. Verse 14 is transitional. It introduces a grand passage of praise to Jesus Christ, which is a fitting conclusion to Paul's prayer. It also introduces the main theme of the

epistle—the lordship, preeminence, person, and work of Jesus Christ—and verses 15-20 proceed to elaborate on these points.