

Jesus Christ

The Image
of the
Invisible God

An Exegesis of the Epistle to the Colossians

Study 1 Introduction to the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians

In endeavouring to undertake an exegetical study of any book of the bible, the following metrics must always be kept in mind:

- Who wrote the book?
- Who was it written to?
- What were the circumstances under which the book was written?
- What does it say?
- What does it say to me personally?

So let's seek to answer the above questions as we make our way through this very profound and spiritually rich book.

Some Background Information

The city of Colosse lay in the beautiful Lycus Valley about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It had been an important town during the Greek and Persian War of the fifth century B.C. Since then, new trade routes had carried most traffic to its neighbouring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis, and had left Colosse only a country village. Unlike Laodicea and Hierapolis, archaeologists have not yet excavated the site of Colosse.

The inhabitants of Colosse were mainly Greek colonists and native Phrygians. When Paul wrote this epistle, though, there were many Jews living in the area as well. Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.)

had relocated hundreds of Jewish families from Mesopotamia to this region. They seem to have been more liberal Jews than those in the neighbouring province of Galatia to the east.



In the bordering province of Galatia the infant faith was threatened by legalism, a Judaizing heresy; here, as in Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:14, 18), the danger lay in a Jewish-Hellenistic religious syncretism, which was an effort by the Jews living in the area to embrace a religious system which included faith in Christ as the Messiah contaminated with demands to keep certain aspects of the Jewish law. When Epaphras reported this to Paul, who was at the time imprisoned in Rome, he took to addressing the problem by writing this letter to the Colossian Christians.

Who wrote the book?

This epistle was unquestionably written by the Apostle Paul. How do we know this with such certainty? (Look at Col 1.1)

Churches had taken root in Colosse, Laodicea (4:16), and probably Hierapolis (4:13). Paul had not visited the Lycus Valley when he wrote this epistle (1:4; 2:1), but he had learned of the spread of the gospel here through Epaphras (1:8) and probably others. It would seem that Epaphras went to Ephesus and was converted under the ministry of Paul (cf. Acts 19:10). He then returned to his home town and started the Colossian church (1:7; 4:12-13). He was a Colossian and had instructed the Christians not only in Colosse (1:7), but probably in Laodicea and Hierapolis too. His more formal name was probably Epaphroditus

Who was the book written to?

The answer is twofold in Col 1.1

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In Col 1.2, why do you think Paul first greeted them with “Grace to you” and then followed that with “peace with God?”

What were the circumstances under which the book was written?

The heart of Paul’s letter to the Colossians deals with a problem peculiar to that church: a heresy being promoted that challenged the deity and sufficiency of Christ. Spiritually the Colossian believers were young, the church having been only established by Epaphras 5-6 years before Paul wrote this letter. Like all “children” they were immature and ripe targets for false teachers to lead them astray. Because Paul insisted upon the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ (Col 1.15-23) it is obvious someone was teaching the opposite – that Christ alone was not enough. This particular attack struck at the very heart of the gospel.

Furthermore, Paul’s denial of the need for human religious rules and regulations (Col 2.16-19) signals that someone was trying to impose a religious system on those who had been saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. The major distinction between them is that in Ephesians, the emphasis is on the church as the body of Christ. In Colossians, the emphasis is on Christ as the Head of the body. Also, Paul wrote Colossians primarily to respond to a particular problem, whereas he wrote Ephesians primarily to expound correct teaching.

What does it say?

The whole message of this epistle finds expression in 2:9-10a.: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete." The two declarations in this sentence are the great revelations of the Colossian letter. The central doctrine in Colossians is Christology.

The fullness of the Godhead is *in Christ*. This is an eternal fact that is always true. In *Him*, the fullness of essential deity dwells in bodily manifestation (form or expression). The Apostle Paul expounded Christ's fullness in three respects in this epistle:

In relation to creation, He is the *Originator* and *Sustainer* of all things (1:16-17). This includes all life.

In relation to redemption, He is the *first-born from the dead* (1:18). Resurrection presupposes death. Death is due to sin. Between creation and resurrection, there was sin and death. In resurrection, Christ was victor over sin, death, and the grave. He is Death's Master.

In relation to reconciliation, Christ is the *maker of peace* (1:19-20). The result of Christ's victory over death is *peace*. He is the reconciler of all the things that sin has separated. His reconciliation affects both people and the created world. In Christ, we see all the fullness of deity: creating, rising triumphantly out of death, and reconciling to the farthest reaches of the universe. That is the Christ of Christianity!

The second major declaration of Colossians is that in Christ, God makes us *complete* (2:10a). Not only is the fullness of the Godhead in Christ, but the filling of the saints is in Christ too. Paul explained what this means.

First, it means that God restores us to "our true place in creation" in Christ. We can regain the scepter and the crown as kings of the earth under God's authority (cf. Gen. 2:15). God has sent us out into all the cosmos to make Christ known (Matt. 28:19-20). Unfortunately, we do not always realize our position. We choose instead to grovel among the world's garbage heaps. Nevertheless, in this sense God makes us full in Christ: We come into a new relationship to all creation through Christ. God restores us to our divinely intended position in creation in Him. We are His trophies.

Second, God restores us to "our true relation to Himself" through Christ's resurrection.

Third, God restores us to "true fellowship with Himself" in Christ. We not only receive from God, but we can also give to God in service. Thus our fellowship is reciprocal. We are His partners.

We experience fullness in Christ, for in Him: God restores us to our true place in creation, to our true relation to Himself, and to our true fellowship with Himself. This restoration enables us to cooperate with God in His purposes. We become, not only trophies of His grace, but His instruments—and even His partners—in our generation.

In view of this revelation, Paul made a threefold appeal:

The first appeal is a warning against a *false philosophy* (2:8). Paul described this false philosophy in two ways. It is the tradition of men, which is essentially speculation. In this context, Paul meant human guessing that leaves God out of His universe.

Paul's second warning is against *false mediation* (2:16-18). He pointed out that ceremonies such as observing certain kinds of foods and festivals are only "shadows." We should not think that observing these ceremonies will improve our relationship to God. We have Jesus Christ, who is the substance to which these ceremonies pointed (e.g., the Jewish feasts). Another type of false mediation involves the worship of angels. We should have nothing to do with this practice because we have direct access to Jesus Christ. He is the Creator and Master of all creatures—including the angels. "

Paul's third warning is against *false confidences* (2:20-23). Our spiritual enemy may tempt us to have confidence in the opinions of others. When false teachers say, "Do not touch this or taste that or handle something," we may think that those statements are authoritative. But this is legalism. Paul urges us not to follow such opinions—but to get our direction from the Lord Jesus.

(Constable, TL *Notes on Colossians*)

What does it say to me personally?

While the Holy Spirit may speak to an individual Christian in any number of ways as one reads this beautiful letter to the Colossians, the matter of supreme importance to the church is her doctrine of Christ. Our Christian life and service will flow out of our doctrine of Christ. We are what we think.

"As a man thinks in his heart so is he" (Prov. 23:7).

Not only must Christ occupy the central place in our lives, but our understanding of Christ must be accurate. It has been said that the best way to discern between a counterfeit and an authentic article is to thoroughly study the original. There is only one original; the fakes come in all shapes and sizes, but by having an intimate knowledge of the original we learn to immediately recognize and reject all imposters.

Exegesis

Look at Colossians 1.1

Paul starts out by citing his apostolic office and calling.

"Here, right at the outset of the letter, is the whole doctrine of grace. A man is not what he has made himself, but what God has made him. There is no such thing as a self-made man; there are only men whom God has made, and men who have refused to allow God to make them."

(Barclay, W *The Letter to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*)

Why do you think Paul cited his office and calling straight up?

His relationship with Christ would serve as the
Paul is the genuine article, he is not one of the Judaizing false teachers.

“..... and Timothy our brother.” Timothy was not an official apostle, but simply a Christian brother. He was with Paul when the apostle wrote this letter, though he was not a co-author (cf. 1:23-25, 29; 4:18, et al.).

Look at Colossians 1.2

Although Paul often refers to **saints** (those who are redeemed) in his letters, **faithful** is only used here in Colossians and in his letter to the Ephesians.

The Colossian believers were "saints" (Gr. *hagios*, those set apart to God) in their position, and "faithful brethren" (Gr. *pistis adelphois*) in their practice. By pronouncing his readers 'faithful,' Paul may be expressing his confidence that, when he has shown them the peril of being influenced by wrong teaching, they will turn away from it.