

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

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INTRODUCTION

One central message which is also prominent teachings of the Bible is salvation through the God-man Jesus Christ. This is what we can read about in Paul's epistle to the Colossians. Two of Paul's prison epistles project two fundamental but most important teachings of the New Testament. In the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul exalts the church of the Christ, whereas in Colossians, he exalts the Christ of the church. It appears that some in Colossae were attempting to minimize Christ and His role in God's plan of salvation, while promoting angel worship, visions, and mysterious knowledge (Col. 2:8-10,18). In this paper, we shall consider the people of Colossae, their city, and other background information to the message Paul wrote to them.

THE CITY OF COLOSSAE

Colossae was located in southwest Phrygia in the Roman province of Asia Minor (part of modern Turkey). The city was by the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. It was located in the fertile Lycus Valley on the road to the East of Ephesus in Asia Minor which was about one hundred miles from Ephesus. It was situated about ten miles southeast of Laodicea; Hierapolis was six miles north of Laodicea. These three cities are connected in Paul's statement in Colossians 4:13: "For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea and them in Hierapolis."

Colossae was a minor city which had previously been a populous center of commerce. About 200 years before Christ, the two near-by cities became important, pulling even the inhabitants of Colossae. Laodicea became the business and trade center. Hierapolis became a very popular resort area. Its hot volcanic springs were advertised to have magical healing powers. Magical superstition made this a good place for pagan worship, so temples were built there. Colossae couldn't compete with the growing popularity of these neighboring cities although it also was beset with oriental mysticism. In the latter part of the reign of Nero, and not long after the epistle was written, Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were at the same time overwhelmed by an earthquake however Colossae recovered from this shock among the three cities according to the Byzantine writers as stated by Barnes.

Colossae was famous for the dark red wool cloth that carried its name colossimum. Colossae was a thriving city in the fifth century B.C., when the Persian king Xerxes (Ahasuerus, Esther 1:1), marched through the region. Black wool and dyes (made from the nearby chalk deposits) were important products. In addition, the city was situated at the junction of the main north-south and east-west trade routes. By Paul's day, however, the main road had been rerouted through nearby Laodicea, thus by-passing Colossae and leading to its decline and the rise of the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Tom Wacaster stated that:

Colossae was one of three important cities that lay about 100 miles from Ephesus. "The area was a meeting point of East and West because an important trade route passed through there" (Wiersby, 8). Along with Hierapolis and Laodicea, Colossae lay in the valley of the River Lycus. Laodicea and Hierapolis lay on opposite sides of the Lycus valley, ten or twelve miles below Colossae, and separated some six

miles from each other. Laodicea, whose name commemorated the rule of the Greco-Syrian dynasty in Asia Minor, was the chief city of the immediate district. Hierapolis, on the other hand, was a health resort, celebrated for the medicinal qualities of its waters, which were extremely abundant. The great prosperity of this region was chiefly due to its wool. The neighboring uplands afforded excellent pasture for sheep, and the streams of the Lycus valley were peculiarly favorable to the dyer's art. Both these cities were actively engaged in the trade of wool and dyed garments. By the time Paul penned this Epistle, Colossae had already dwindled into a third-rate town, whether from natural causes, or from the conservative and Oriental habits of its people, who were slow to adapt themselves to new conditions (Wacaster, pg 196).

THE RELIGION OF THE COLOSSIANS

Although Colossae's population was mainly Gentile, there was a large Jewish settlement dating from the days of Antiochus the Great (223 – 187 B.C.). Colossae's mixed population of Jews and Gentiles resulted in multiple religious groups. Pagan worship was dominant, Judaism and later Christianity. Unlike Ephesus, which is unknown for the temple of Diana, Colossae was predominantly pagan city but not of a particular known idol.

THE CHURCH AT COLOSSE

The establishment of the church is uncertain. One possibility is that the church was established during Paul's extended stay at Ephesus, where the effect of his work spread throughout Asia Minor (cf. Ac 19:8-10). It may not have been Paul himself, but one of his coworkers who went out to Colossae. Epaphras probably planted the church in Colossae, judging from the fact that the believers there first learned the gospel from him (1:7), as well as those who were in Hierapolis and Laodicea (4:12-

13). Afterwards he served as their minister and informed the apostle of their conversion (1:7-8).

Paul had never been to Colossae. He had turned northward from South Galatia on his second journey (Acts 16:6) and had come by 'the upper country' (Acts 19:1) to Ephesus on his third journey, and not by the main road that led through the Lycus valley. So, he had missed Colossae on both trips. Several years after the Colossian church was founded, a dangerous heresy arose to threaten it, one not identified with any particular historical system. It contained elements of what later became known as Gnosticism: that God is good, but matter is evil, that Jesus Christ was merely one of a series of emanations descending from God and being less than God (a belief that led them to deny His true humanity), and that a secret, higher knowledge about Scripture was necessary for enlightenment and salvation.

The Colossian heresy also embraced aspects of Jewish legalism, e.g., the necessity of circumcision for salvation, observance of the ceremonial rituals of the Old Testament law (dietary laws, festivals, Sabbaths), and rigid asceticism. It also called for the worship of angels and mystical experience. Epaphras was so concerned about this heresy that he made the long journey from Colossae to Rome (4:12-13), where Paul was a prisoner.

Other members of the church at Colossae included Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus, who may have been father, mother, and son respectively (cf. 4:17; Philemon 1-2). If Philemon and his family were hosts of the church at Colossae, then

Onesimus (Philemon's slave) would have also been a member there upon his return (cf. 4:7-9; Philemon 8-16).

THE AUTHOR OF THE EPISTLE

Paul is identified as author at the beginning (1:1,23) as customarily in his epistles and in this at the end also (4:18). The testimony of the early church, including such key figures as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius, confirms that the opening claim is genuine. Additional evidence for Paul's authorship comes from the book's close parallels with Philemon, which is universally accepted as having been written by Paul. Both were written (A.D. 60–62) while Paul was a prisoner in Rome (4:3,10,18; Philemon 9,10,13,23) plus the names of the same people (e.g., Timothy, Aristarchus, Archippus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, Onesimus, and Demas) appear in both epistles, showing that both were written by the same author at about the same time. It also appears that Paul had reconciled with John Mark (Col. 4:10). Though Paul did not personally know the recipients, he was acquainted with them through Epaphras. Epaphras probably planted the church in Colossae.

The internal evidence of Paul being the author in the New Testament and the epistle itself are overwhelming and undisputable. These evidence include:

- Colossians 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 Colossae: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

- Colossians 1:23: [23] “If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.”
- Colossians 4:10: [10] “Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him;).”
- Colossians 4:18: [18] “The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you. Amen.”

An extract biography of the author who identified himself as Paul is as follows. His Hebrew name was Saul, and was born in Tarsus, a major Roman city on the coast of southeast Asia Minor. Tarsus was the center for the tentmaking industry, which may have influenced Paul to choose that craft as his occupation (his primary paying profession). His religious profession was that of a Jewish Pharisee. He was from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5) and trained at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), a well-respected rabbi of the day. He was an ardent persecutor of the early church (Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6, Acts 8:3, 22:4-5, 26:9-11) until his life changing conversion to Christianity (Acts 9:1-31, Galatians 1:11-24). Paul was called by God to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Galatians 1:15-17). Paul who ordinarily would have nothing to do with Gentiles (Acts 10:28). Paul wrote 13 epistles

in the New Testament. Tradition has it that Paul was beheaded shortly after he wrote 2 Timothy in about AD 67.

THE DATE, PLACE OF WRITING AND RECIPIENTS

Colossians is one of Paul's four "prison epistles" (4:18) so are Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. Although Caesarea and Ephesus have been suggested as possible locations of authorship of Colossae, the general consensus is that these epistles were written during Paul's imprisonment at Rome (Acts 28:16, 30-31). If such is truly the case, then Paul wrote Colossians around 61-63 A.D. from Rome. The indication is that the epistles to the Colossians, Philemon and the Ephesians were carried to their destination by Tychicus and Onesimus (cf. 4:7-9; Philemon 10-12; Ephesians 6:21-22).

The date of writing as hinted above was probably about AD 60 to 65. Many scholars peg it around AD 62 of whose side I am. From various references in the letter, it would appear that some of the Christians in Colossae were Jews (Col. 2:11, 16, 21). Since the city was a Gentile city, it is appropriate to conclude that the recipients of this letter were both Jews and Gentiles in the church at Colossae as the author stated in his salutation (1:2).

PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE

As noted earlier that the church at Colossae may have begun during Paul's three years ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19) by possibly Epaphras (1:5-7). It is believed that several years after the Colossian church was founded, a dangerous heresy arose

to threaten it, one not identified with any particular historical system. The heresy that came up there contained elements of what later became known as Gnosticism. The Gnosticism had evidently intruded with its Greek pantheistic philosophy. Their belief was that God is good, but matter is evil, that Jesus Christ was merely one of a series of emanations descending from God and being less than God. A belief that led them to deny His true humanity, and that a secret higher knowledge about Scripture was necessary for enlightenment and salvation.

The Colossian heresy also embraced aspects of Jewish legalism, e.g., the necessity of circumcision for salvation, observance of the ceremonial rituals of the Old Testament law (dietary laws, festivals, Sabbaths), and rigid asceticism. It also called for the worship of angels and mystical experience. Epaphras was so concerned about this heresy that he made the long journey from Colossae to Rome (4:12-13), where Paul was a prisoner and reported the situation to Paul (1:7-8). This report was for the most part favorable (2:5). But the subject matter in the epistle strongly suggests that the church was facing a twofold danger: the danger of relapse into paganism with its gross immorality (cf. 1:21-23; 2:6; 3:5-11), and the danger of accepting what became to known as "the Colossian heresy".

This heresy was a syncretism involving four elements of both pagan and Jewish origin which can be summarized as:

- Philosophies of men - which denied all sufficiency and preeminence of Christ (2:8).

- Judaism ceremonialism - which attached special significance to the rite of circumcision, food regulations, and observance of days (2:11,16-17).
- Angel worship - which detracted from the uniqueness of Christ (2:18).
- Asceticism - which called for harsh treatment of the body as the means to control its lusts (2:20-23).

To guard against these dangers, Paul wrote to warn the Colossians against relapse (1:21-23), warn them against the "solution" being urged upon them by those denying the all-sufficiency of Christ (2:8-23) The apostle directed their attention to the "Beloved Son", the "All-Sufficient and Preeminent Savior" (1:13-18; 2:8-10). This is what Matthew Henry had to say about the purpose.

"The design of the epistle is to warn them of the danger of the Jewish zealots, who pressed the necessity of observing the ceremonial law; and to fortify them against the mixture of the Gentile philosophy with their Christian principles. He professes a great satisfaction in their stedfastness and constancy and encourages them to perseverance. It was written about the same time with the epistles to the Ephesians and Philippians, A.D. 62, and in the same place, while he was now a prisoner at Rome. He was not idle in his confinement, and the word of God was not bound" (Henry, 41053).

THE LESSONS FROM THE EPISTLE

Colossians is perhaps the most Christ-centered book in the Bible. In it, Paul stresses the preeminence of the Person of Christ and the completeness of the salvation He provides. The resounding theme in Colossians is the preeminence and sufficiency of Christ in all things. The believer is complete in Him alone and lacks nothing because "in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (2:9). The first part of the epistle is an exposition of Christ's supremacy (chapters 1-2); the

second part explains the implications of Christ's supremacy and how the believer's submission to Christ entails (chapters 3- 4).

Colossians contains teaching on several key areas of theology, including the deity of Christ (1:15-20; 2:2-10), reconciliation (1:20-23), redemption (1:13,14; 2:13,14; 3:9-11), election (3:12), forgiveness (3:13), and the nature of the church (1:18,24,25; 2:19; 3:11, 15). The Colossians epistle can be outlined as follows:

I. DOCTRINE - Chapter One.

1. Colossians 1:1-2: Salutation.
2. Colossians 1:3-8: Gratitude for the Colossians' Hope.
3. Colossians 1:9-11: Prayer for the Colossians.
4. Colossians 1:12-14: Salvation is in the Kingdom.
5. Colossians 1:15-22: Preeminence of Christ.
6. Colossians 1:23-29: Paul Rejoiced in Being Christ's Minister.

II. DANGERS - Chapter Two.

1. Colossians 2:1-8: Admonition to be Rooted and Built up in Christ.
2. Colossians 2:9-17: The Law was Nailed to the Cross of Christ.
3. Colossians 2:18-23: Beware of Gnostic Error.

III. DUTY - Chapter Three.

1. Colossians 1:1-2: Salutation.
2. Colossians 3:1-7: Hope of Glory and Sinful Practices are Incompatible.
3. Colossians 3:8-11: Put off Sinful Conduct.
4. Colossians 3:12-17: Put on Spiritual Qualities.

5. Colossians 3:18-25: Instructions to Family Members and Workers.

IV. DEMONSTRATION - Chapter Four.

1. Colossians 4:1-6: Sundry Admonitions.
2. Colossians 4:7-14: Paul's Co-Workers Acknowledged.
3. Colossians 4:15-17: Farewell Instructions.
4. Colossians 4:18: Paul's Final Salutation.

CONCLUSION

Paul wrote this letter while in prison, probably about the same time he wrote to the Ephesians. As Paul, in the Ephesians epistles exalts the church of the Christ, in Colossians he exalts the Christ of the church. It appears that some in Colossae were attempting to minimize Christ and His role in God's plan of salvation, while promoting angel worship, visions, and esoteric knowledge (Col. 2:8-10,18).

Therefore, Paul wrote to the church to fortify it against false teachers who might try to impose strict rules about eating and drinking and religious festivals, etc. In this relatively short letter, Paul projected the superiority of Christ over all human philosophies and traditions. He spoke of Christ's deity ("He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;" 1:15) and of the reconciliation Jesus Christ accomplished with His blood. Paul then explained that the right way of living in this world is to focus on heavenly rather than earthly things (3:1-4). God's chosen people must leave their sinful lives behind and live in a godly way, looking to Christ who has transferred us into His kingdom the church which is His body (1:13,18).

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