

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिन्दी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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Colossians

The letter to the Colossians combines some of the deepest and most sublime teaching about Christ with some very basic instructions for life. As strongly as any other book in the New Testament, Colossians reminds us that Christ must always be preeminent in a Christian's affections and worship.

Setting

The city of Colosse was located about 120 miles (193 kilometers) east of Ephesus, in the province of Asia (in modern-day Turkey).

Paul mentions Epaphras as the one who first brought the Good News to the Colossians ([1:7](#)). Epaphras was probably converted during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus. Ephesus was the commercial and governmental center for the whole province, which included Colosse. Luke tells us that during Paul's time in Ephesus, "people throughout the province of Asia . . . heard the word of the Lord" ([Acts 19:10](#)). While Paul had not visited Colosse ([Col 2:1](#)), he was the spiritual "father" of Epaphras and thus the spiritual "grandfather" of their church. So he wrote with both apostolic authority and personal caring.

When Colossians was written, Epaphras was visiting Paul in prison ([4:12](#)). He had told Paul about some of the difficulties the young church was going through. He was especially concerned about some false teachers in Colosse who were emphasizing the importance of "spiritual rulers and authorities" ([2:15](#)) and "spiritual powers of this world" ([2:8,20](#)), and thus were detracting from Christ's preeminence. Paul wrote to address these issues.

Summary

Colossians divides into two parts, with [chs 1-2](#) focused on theology and [chs 3-4](#) on practical matters.

Paul's greetings ([1:1-2](#)) are followed by a thanksgiving section ([1:3-14](#)), a typical way of opening a New Testament letter. Then, to make his key theological point, Paul quotes and adapts a hymn about the supremacy of Christ ([1:15-20](#)), then makes a practical application ([1:21-23](#)) before discussing his own ministry as apostle to the Gentiles ([1:24-2:5](#)). He then returns to his main point, urging the Colossians to maintain their allegiance to Christ Jesus, the one who provides for their spiritual life ([2:6-15](#)). The theological part of the letter concludes with a warning not to become preoccupied with rules as a means to spiritual fulfillment ([2:16-23](#)).

The more practical part of the letter ([chs 3-4](#)) opens with a general call to turn from sin and embrace the new life in Christ ([3:1-11](#)). Paul follows this with instructions for the Christian community ([3:12-17](#)) and family life ([3:18-4:1](#)). The letter concludes with an exhortation to prayer ([4:2-6](#)) and remarks about coworkers and other Christians ([4:7-18](#)).

Date and Occasion of Writing

Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, and Philippians are referred to as the Prison Letters—all four were written while Paul was in jail for preaching about Jesus Christ (see [4:18](#)). Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon are closely related, having probably been written from the same place at about the same time (either Rome or Ephesus—see Ephesians Book Introduction, “Date and Place of Writing”). These three letters share common themes and vocabulary and were written to people in the same part of the world: Colosse was only about 120 miles east of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia, and Philemon was a resident of Colosse.

Paul mentioned some of the same coworkers in each of the Prison Letters. In his letter to Philemon, he explained why he was sending Onesimus, Philemon’s runaway slave, back to him. Onesimus also traveled with the letter to the Colossians ([4:9](#)). In both Colossians ([4:7](#)) and Ephesians ([Eph 6:21](#)), Paul said that Tychicus would give the churches more detailed information about Paul’s situation. So Tychicus was probably the messenger who carried these three letters to their destinations in Asia Minor.

The False Teaching

Paul wrote to the Colossians because false teachers were disturbing the church. Colosse was an important commercial center on one of the main Roman roads in the region, so the city would have been exposed to ideas from many religions and philosophies. Like many false teachings, the "Colossian heresy" was probably a mixture of various attitudes and ideas that were in the air at the time. We cannot identify these false teachers or the details of their particular teaching, but we can see some characteristics: (1) The false teachers were apparently insisting on the observance of Sabbath and new moon festivals ([2:16](#)), which suggests some Jewish input in their viewpoint; (2) they were preoccupied with following various rules, particularly pertaining to the body (asceticism); and (3) they placed emphasis on spiritual beings, which was typical of many religious movements of the period. The basic problem is clear: The teaching did not regard Christ as the center and origin of all religious experience. Any teaching or philosophy that fails to do so is not the Good News.

Meaning and Message

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul steers a young Christian church back to the apostles' message of the Good News about Christ. To counter the influence of false teaching, Paul insisted that Christ is supreme over all beings in creation, both spiritual and physical. Jesus is the one in whom the very fullness of God resides. Jesus is also the only ultimate source of spiritual growth, the center from which all true spiritual experience must radiate ([2:19](#)). The false teachers were deriving their emphasis on rules from something other than Christ, and this meant that the rules could not produce spiritual benefit ([2:23](#)). In this case, Paul argues, addition means subtraction: Trying to add anything to Christ leads to subtracting the power that he alone gives to lead the Christian life.

Christ has reconciled us to the God in whom we now live, so all of our spiritual needs are fulfilled by Christ. We need no one and nothing else for true spiritual fulfillment.

Paul urged the Colossians to avoid putting too much stock in ritual practices ([2:16–23](#)). Instead, all Christians should identify with Christ in his death and resurrection ([2:11, 19–20; 3:1–4](#)) and let the Good News, as preached by the apostles, mold their thinking and behavior. Colossians reminds us that we must keep Christ at the center of all that we do, in our own spiritual journey and in the life of the church. Adding to Christ is inevitably a distortion of true Christian faith.