

# Colossians

## 1. Introduction of the Book

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Many times I hear some Christians talk about the first century churches with some sort of envies and thinking that they were the models of the church because they had teachers like Peter, Paul, John, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, and Apollos.

Perfect churches? That would be far from the truth. Yes, they had a great line up of teachers and evangelists. But the churches themselves were riddled with problems just like now:

Strife, heresy, extremism, personality conflicts, jealousy, misunderstanding, compromise, immorality, defection, hypocrisy, legalism, and spiritual bullying. If that is not bad enough, the believers of the first century were the objects of physical persecution and martyrdom from the governments and the people around their homes.

The New Testament era was not nearly as attractive as some would make it out to be. I'd rather live in the time of the return of Jesus than the first century.

The first century religious environment was much like our own. It was a time of religious mixing, with people borrowing a little from this and a little from that. The only difference is that in the first century, they joined a group who did the borrowing. In our 21st century culture, people do the borrowing themselves. Yes, they can be the founders of their own cults.

Whatever the problem was, the apostle Paul dwells on the solution: a better understanding of Jesus. Knowing the real Jesus helps us stay away from the counterfeit, no matter how it is packaged.

### A. AUTHOR

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

The author of the letter to Colossians is the apostle Paul obviously. Many scholars believe that he wrote this sometime between 60-62 A.D. while he was in a Roman prison six years before his death. This epistle is another of what are called "the prison epistles" – Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon.

### B. ABOUT COLOSSE

*Colossians 1:2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

It was written to the people living in what was called the Lycus Valley, consisting of three communities: Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse. This area was an intersection of Eastern and Western culture because an important trade route passed through there.

Colosse was located about 100 miles inland from Ephesus. Though once a leading city in Asia Minor, Colosse became somewhat a second-rate market town in latter days and it was destroyed shortly thereafter by an earthquake.

All kinds of philosophies mingled in this cosmopolitan area. There was a large Jewish colony in Colosse, and there was also a constant influx of new ideas and doctrines from the East. It was fertile ground for religious speculations and heresies.

Actually, the city of Colosse is not even mentioned in the Book of Acts. All our biblical information about the church there comes from this letter and a few comments in the letter to Philemon.

The Colossian believers had been taught well – not by Paul, but by a man named Epaphras, whose name appears in this letter. It was very likely Epaphras who had founded the church in Colosse and had instructed the new believers in the true doctrines of the Christian faith.

Now, however, the attacks of the false teachers were tempting them to forsake the truth. That temptation is experienced in every generation. It is very likely, in fact, that some of you who are listening to this sermon right now have been or are being tempted to drift from the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Either subtly or more overtly, you may have begun to compromise your faith. That was what was happening in Colosse.

The apostle Paul understood that if this heresy were given free rein, it could very well mean the demise of the three little communities in the valley and perhaps even spread like cancer into cities like Ephesus and on across the Aegean Sea to Corinth and other important population centers. So through this directed and piercing letter, Paul intended to nip this false teaching in the bud before it spread out of control.

### **C. THE FORMAT OF THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS**

As with most of Paul's letters, this epistle combines profound doctrinal teachings with practical applications.

The first two chapters contain some of Paul's most eloquent writing about the supremacy of Jesus Christ, reconciliation to God, the folly of following man-made rules. Last two chapter shows practical applications that we can get from the foundation the Holy Spirit laid down through apostle Paul.

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians was written and sent about the same time as his Colossian letter. Keeping this in mind, we can discover many parallels between these two letters. However, the emphasis in Ephesians is on the church, the body of Christ. But the emphasis in Colossians is on Christ, the Head of the body.

In this letter, Paul used the vocabulary of the false teachers, but he did not use their definitions. He used these words in their true Christian meaning. As we study Colossians, we will find words such as 'fullness,' 'perfect,' 'complete,' and 'wisdom' all of which were used by the Gnostic heretics.

### **D. FALSE TEACHING BY GNOSTICS**

The word "gnostic" is derived from 'gnosis', the Greek word for 'knowledge'. In Greek and Latin language, if you add 'a' in front of a word, it becomes the opposite meaning of the original word. So an 'agnostic' is 'one who does not know' or 'ignorant'.

Gnostics claimed that they had a secret knowledge that was necessary in order to gain salvation. It was secret information available only to an exclusive group of peo-

ple. The net result was a message that enticed the vulnerable with this message: "There is something much deeper than Jesus Christ. Jesus is good. You need him. But you need more than that. You need this special knowledge. It will give you much deeper meaning to your life – and it gives you salvation to boot." That is the garbage doctrine they were selling to the people of Colosse.

Notice how that arrogant message cunningly tried to undermine Jesus Christ and attacked His adequacy to be all we need for salvation. That's why Paul stressed the supremacy of Jesus Christ in the strongest terms:

*Colossians 1:15-18 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.*

You cannot point to anything beyond Jesus Christ and still have the truth about salvation. When you go back as far as you can imagine, you come to Jesus. He is eternal. In response to the defective view that Jesus was not God, Paul's letter to the Colossians is his greatest declaration that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, the very God, the Creator, the preexistent Sustainer of all things and the Reconciler of all things. Look at what Paul wrote in such grand style in chapter 2:

*Colossians 2:9-10 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth*

Gnosticism attacked the deity of Jesus Christ but in a subtle and alluring manner. That's the way it is with most false teachings, isn't it? Most false teachers slither into a person's life subtly. They don't arrive brandishing swords. They don't burn Bibles and attack the faith, calling you "stupid" and "immature" because you have bought into the message of Scripture. They don't even necessarily reject Jesus outright; they simply include Him as one option among many. They approach with a smile. They bring a bouquet of flowers. They give you a CD to listen to, a song to sing; a philosophy that seems to blend nicely into your life. But the truth is – someday their subtle tentacles will suck the joy and the power of the Gospel and the hope of eternal life, and especially the awe-inspiring message of the grace of God right out of you. Please, please be very careful. Know what you believe and in whom you believe. If you have Jesus Christ, you have the Lord of life. Christ, and Christ alone. He is all you need for salvation, and for life.

### **E. FALSE TEACHING WITH SUPERIOR BEHAVIOR**

The false teachers plaguing the Colossian church seemed heavily influenced by the teachings of legalists who taught that salvation required superior behavior. The Colossian believers were in danger of turning their focus from Christ alone to keeping legalistic regulations such as circumcision, dietary laws, and religious ceremonies.

*Colossians 2:21-23 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," 22 which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.*

In addition to that the practices of various strains of asceticism – the teaching that the body is evil and thus should be treated harshly through the practice of self-denial, and you have all the ingredients for a philosophy that threatened to disconnect believers from their Head, Jesus Christ. Paul declared that Christ, and Christ alone, deserved center stage in their lives – and ours.

The gnostic people also held to a form of astrology, believing that angelic beings ruled stars and influenced affairs on earth.

Do we have any of this heresy today? Yes, we do. When we make Jesus Christ and the Christian revelation only part of a total religious system or philosophy, we cease to give Him the preeminence. When we strive for “spiritual perfection” or “spiritual fullness” by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals instead of learning from the Word of God and being led by the Holy Spirit, we go backward instead of forward.

Sad to say, there are many Christians who actually believe that some people, religious system, or discipline can add something to their spiritual experience. But they already have everything they ever will need in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

## **F. LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS TO LEARN**

### **1) Jesus Christ is FIRST, not one among many, but SUPREME.**

Nothing can rival the place of Jesus in our lives, nothing. If we come across anything creeping alongside, claiming to be equal to or above Jesus, it must be rejected quickly and decisively. Jesus Christ alone is Lord.

### **2) The infiltration of heresy is subtle, not bold and offensive.**

I know of few teachings more outwardly appealing today than the message of the heretic. There is a powerful pull toward false teachings that add some human element to the pure Gospel of Christ – whether it’s the keeping of all kinds of detailed rules or whether it’s the shedding of all restraint. Heresy is subtle, smooth, winsome, and attractive. We must be well-grounded in the foundations of the faith in Jesus Christ to resist.

### **3) The way we live our lives is important.**

The way we treat others is not irrelevant. The way we handle success and failure speaks volumes. Keep a careful eye on your attitude and your behavior wherever you are – at home, at church, at work, at school, in the community halls, and in the shopping malls. Believe it or not, the way you walk your talk is an announcement bigger than any Gospel tract you put on somebody’s desk. People are watching how you live. They’re watching how you work. Let’s face it, the eyes of the world are on those who profess to love and serve the Lord Jesus – and His eyes are on us too. Ultimately, we will answer to our Maker. Our diligence underscores and reveals the substance of our doctrine.

### **4) People are eternal souls made in the image of God, not an anonymous face.**

You never become so important that people become unimportant. Never. We are created to be in the relationship with Jesus Christ, and it would be good to remind ourselves of the way God calls us to relate to each other. I urge us to be careful that we don’t become so preoccupied with all the programs and all the plans and all the projects that people become unimportant to us. Our lives are a call to service to our Lord Jesus and to our brothers and sisters whom He has placed in our lives.

