



INTRODUCTION TO PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

INVITATION TO STUDY

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges of the Christian church down through the ages has been maintaining the purity of the truth. Worldly philosophies and human religious tradition have always been a threat to the truth of the gospel which was taught by Jesus Christ and His apostles. The heart of Jesus' message is contained in a statement He made to His disciples, *I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me* (John 14:6). This message is very simple and direct, but the majority of religious people of Jesus' day considered it blasphemy. After Jesus' death and resurrection, His apostles continued to spread the gospel throughout their world, but they found strong opposition in traditional Judaism, pagan religions, and Greek and Eastern philosophies. Traditional religion, intellectualism, and mysticism would not accept the simplicity of Jesus as the only way to God, the supreme and exclusive truth, and the full sufficiency for eternal life. Consequently, the early church was bombarded from without and shaken from within by teachings which surreptitiously attempted to change or add to the pure and true gospel message.

Many of the New Testament epistles were written to warn about and refute false teachings. Colossians is one such epistle. Even though Colossians was written by the apostle Paul nearly two thousand years ago, the words of warning and exhortation are relevant and meaningful today. Most of all, Paul's clear exposition of Christ as the center of Christian belief is essential knowledge for every Christian. Are you absolutely positive of the truth of what you believe? Do you know without a doubt who Christ is, what He has done for you, continues to do for you, and will do for you in the future? Are you attempting to add anything to Christ's words or work, such as your own works, traditional religious beliefs, rationalism, "new age" philosophy, or mystical experiences? Paul's letter to the Colossians, which is also a letter to you, will ground you in the truth of Christ, the person of Christ, and the power of Christ. You are invited to read and study this short, yet compelling letter. Will you make the decision to do that with an open mind and an open heart so God may teach you and confirm and strengthen your security in the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ?

INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL

Before beginning our study of Colossians, it is necessary to lay the groundwork to establish the context of the letter so we might clearly understand what our writer

has to say. Who wrote the letter, why, when and from where? Who were the recipients of the letter? What was the writer's purpose in writing? The answers to these questions will give the background information needed to begin a knowledgeable study of Colossians.

I. The Writer of Colossians - The Apostle Paul

In the first verse of the letter, Paul introduces himself as the writer. *Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God* (Colossians 1:1).

A. Early Life

Paul, whose Hebrew name was Saul, was born in Tarsus, a major city in the Roman province of Cilicia, located in southeast Asia Minor (Acts 21:39). He was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5) and also a Roman citizen, a privilege he inherited from his father (Acts 22:28). It was customary for every Jewish boy to learn a trade, and Paul learned tent-making. When he came of age, he was sent to Jerusalem to study the Jewish Law under the distinguished teacher Gamaliel the Elder (Acts 22:3). He became very zealous for God and was a devoted Pharisee.

The first mention of Paul (Saul) in the Bible occurs in Acts 7:58 at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. From this time, Paul turned his zeal toward the persecution of Christians and his reputation became well known. In Acts 9:13, Ananias of Damascus states, *I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. Paul himself attests, I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women* (Acts 22:4). Paul concurs, *You have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it* (Galatians 1:13).

B. Conversion

Paul's life was changed in a dramatic way when he was at the height of his opposition to the church. He had obtained letters from the Jewish high priest giving him authority to arrest Christians in Damascus and take them back to Jerusalem. On the road to Damascus, Paul encountered the Lord Jesus Christ and was changed forever (Acts 9:3-19). "The persecutor of the church became the preacher of Christ. The inquisitor of the faithful became the champion of the faith. He had seen the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ and was the servant of all for Jesus' sake" (A.T. Robertson, Epochs in the Life of Paul).

C. Ministry

Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, a preacher, and a missionary. He was also a prolific writer. Of the twenty-one New Testament letters, thirteen were written by Paul. Many of his letters were written during his three missionary journeys between A.D. 47 and 56. The letter to the Colossians was written later, around A.D. 61-62, after his third missionary journey when he was arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26-36). During that time he was under house-arrest, awaiting trial in Rome (Acts 28:11-30).

Paul's letters are filled with love for his fellow believers. He exults in their joys and in their fruitfulness. He sympathizes with their sorrows and their struggles. He is ever courteous and never imposes blame without first a word of praise. He is eloquent and intelligent. Paul had a broad knowledge of Greek philosophy and rhetoric, but he preached only the knowledge of God and of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ because that is where fullness of life is to be found. His letters are emotional and affectionate but unyielding on vital points of Christian doctrine. You will discover all of these things as you read and study Colossians. You will not only learn what Paul has to teach you — you will also get to know the apostle Paul himself.

II. The Recipients of the Letter - The Colossians

A. The City of Colossae

The city of Colossae was located in the Lycus River valley of the province of Phrygia in Asia Minor. It was about 120 miles inland from the major commercial city of Ephesus. Colossae was known for its manufacture of dyes and export of fine wool. In ancient times, it had been on the main trade route from Ephesus to Pergamos. However, by New Testament times, the city was in decline. Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake not long after Paul's letter was written.

At the time Paul wrote his letter, the population of Colossae was mainly Gentile, native Phrygians. However, there was also a substantial Jewish community. Antiochus the Great had relocated a large number of Jews to that region around 200 B. C., and the Jewish population had grown steadily since that time.

B. The Christian Church at Colossae

From Colossians 1:3-4, some have surmised that Paul had never been to Colossae. But on his third missionary journey, between A.D. 53 and 57, he spent considerable time in nearby Ephesus evangelizing and teaching. In the book of Acts, Luke recorded that during that time, *all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks* (Acts 19:10). It has been conjectured

that Epaphras, whom Paul mentions in Colossians 1:7 and 4:12-13, was the founder of the Colossian church. He possibly visited Ephesus during Paul's stay there, converted to Christianity under Paul's teaching, and returned home to Colossae to take the good news and begin a new church.

The church at Colossae was made up of both Gentiles and converted Jews. According to Paul's letter, they were *faithful brethren* (1:2), who had *faith in Christ Jesus* (1:4), and a *love for all the saints* (1:4). They were *bringing forth fruit* (1:6), and *exhibiting good discipline* (NASB) and *steadfastness of faith in Christ* (12:5). If the church members were both faithful and fruitful, why did Paul feel it necessary to write his letter of exhortation and encouragement?

III. The Purpose of Colossians

Most commentators describe Colossians as a friendly, preventative letter because there is no evidence that the church had succumbed to any error. However, it had come to Paul's attention that imminent problems were threatening the church at Colossae, and although the young church was faithful and growing in the Lord, they needed to be warned of the dangers. The threat lay in the fact that the Colossian congregation was a mixture of Gentiles and Jews with their respective backgrounds of paganism and Judaism. "The whole syncretistic religious environment in which their churches existed threatened the purity of the new faith" (R.C. Lucas, The Message of Colossians and Philemon).

A. Worldly Philosophies

Greek philosophy was rooted in the belief that spirit was good and matter was evil. Therefore, God, who was good, could not have created the material world which was evil. A degenerated emanation, far removed from God, must have created the evil world. Jesus was considered to be one of the higher and better emanations of God, but belief in Jesus Christ alone was not believed to be adequate for salvation. A higher, mystical knowledge was necessary to understand the depths of divine mysteries.

Paul warned the Colossians, *Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ* (Colossians 2:8).

B. Jewish Tradition

The Jewish religion was centered around God's Law. The rite of circumcision was the sign of the Jew's covenant relationship with God (Genesis 17:10). The Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8) and the religious feasts (Leviticus 23) were to be observed according to the law. There

were strict laws concerning foods (Leviticus 11). In addition, over the years, many man-made traditions, burdensome to the common people, had been added to the law (Luke 11:46).

Christ's coming had fulfilled the ceremonial law and declared the traditions of men to be ineffectual. Christ had also opened the door to God, through faith, to *all those who believe* (Romans 3:21-25). Therefore, Paul warned his readers, *Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ* (Colossians 2:16-17). He went on to say, *There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all* (Colossians 3:11).

A particular Jewish sect, the Essenes, were probably influenced by Greek elements as well. They were very rigid legalists and strict ascetics. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, they also worshiped angels.

Paul's letter exhorts, *Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind* (Colossians 2:18). He then goes on to warn against, self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body (2:23).

C. Paul's Theme

The purpose of Paul's letter is to refute the heresy and confirm the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. The Christian needs neither philosophy nor religion, for the Christian has Christ and is to be filled with Him and the knowledge of Him. Even more than that, the Christian has died with Christ to the basic principles of the world and is not to live according to the commandments and doctrines of men. The Christian calling is to *walk in a manner worthy of the Lord* (1:10, NASB). Is your own life rooted and grounded in the sufficiency of Christ? What rules or activities or religious practices do you engage in because you think they make you more spiritual? Are there some aspects of your own spiritual life which you believe make you superior to other believers? Paul's message to you in Colossians is that Christ should be supreme in your life because all the fullness of God is in Him. He is sufficient for salvation and for every need. It is unnecessary to search any further than Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Your completeness, your fullness, is in Him and Him alone.

IV. Introduction To The Letter To The Colossians

Colossians is a personal letter, a polemic letter, and a practical letter.

A. A Personal Letter

The first 14 verses of Paul's letter to the Colossians contains his warm personal greeting, his heartfelt thanks to God for the good report he has received of their faith, and a beautiful prayer for their spiritual growth.

The last 12 verses of the letter are also personal, expressing greetings and exhortation to specific individuals within the church at Colossae. These verses contain practical application as well.

B. A Polemic Letter

A polemic is a refutation of a specific opinion or doctrine. From Colossians 1:15, through the end of Colossians 2, Paul refutes the heretical opinions and doctrines which were a potential danger to the Colossian church. The one verse which most aptly summarizes the polemic of the letter is *Christ is all, and in all* (Colossians 3:11).

C. A Practical Letter

The last two chapters of Colossians is practical, encouraging the readers to be filled with the knowledge of the will of God and to walk in a manner which is worthy of the new life they have been given.

Applications

1. Paul's teaching and application in Colossians is just as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. As you read and study, will you consider it a personal letter written to you?
2. Paul states in Colossians 3:11 that *Christ is all, and in all*. Is He your all? How does your life demonstrate that? Do you have confidence that He dwells in you? If you are not sure, will you ask your discussion leader for a Disciplier's Confidence Letter which explains how to have such assurance?
3. Will you read and study your Bible daily so that you may grow in the knowledge of the will of God?
4. As you study the book of Colossians, will you ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him (Colossians 1:9-10)?

OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS

I. Personal 1:1-4

A. Greeting 1:1-2

B. Thanksgiving 1:3-8

C. Prayer 1:9-14

II. Polemical (Theological Argument) 1:15-2:23

A. Supremacy of Christ 1:15-29

B. Sufficiency of Christ 2:1-23

III. Practical Application 3-4

A. Submit and serve in newness of life 3:1-4:1

**B. Salt the earth with prayer, wise conduct, and graceful
speech 4:2-18**