



Colossians: The Big Picture

Colossians: Ancient Truth for a Modern World (part 1)

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Introduction

This morning we're going to begin a new study of Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae in the 1st century. Over the next several weeks, we'll explore the letter in depth, and we'll discover how this very ancient truth speaks to us today in our modern world.

But in order for us to truly understand the impact that the letter to the *Colossians* has for us, we need to spend a little time together in a more "*academic*" endeavor. We need to understand a few things about the context of this letter — the history behind it, and the setting of the people to whom it was written.

And, before we look at the individual "trees," we need to get a big perspective of the "forest." So this morning I'd like to offer a somewhat different approach to what we typically do during our study together. It may feel a bit like a "lecture" in school for a little bit, but I think the information is important. And then I'd like us to... well... we'll get to that in a little bit. 😊

Welcome to Colossae

Colossae was a small city — about 100 miles east of the coastal metropolis of *Ephesus* — in the valley of the *Lycus River* (a branch of the larger *Meander*). The city was in the southwest region of ancient *Phrygia* — *Asia Minor*, and now modern-day *Turkey*.

It was very close to the city of *Hierapolis* — which was a place known for health spas, relaxation, and sensual pleasure — and *Laodicea* — which was a center for commercial trading and politics.

Colossae itself was once modestly *prosperous*, taking advantage of its location along a *mountain pass* that all travelers had to use. But by the 1st century, Colossae's economic prominence had withered... largely due to the rise of so many other nearby towns sharing in the profits.

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Colossae was occupied by the *Saracens*, and later lost to the obscurity of history. As of today, though we know its location, the city has still not been *excavated*; there may be many wonders waiting for us deep beneath the dust and rubble.

Its location made Colossae a prime *crossroads* for the message of Christ's resurrection which was spreading all over the Mediterranean region. Though it seems Paul

himself ***did not visit*** Colossae, certainly his associates did. It's likely that a Christian church was established there by a man named ***Epaphras***. Among that church's constituency was a humble slave named ***Onesimus*** and his more famous master, ***Philemon***. (You can read more of their story in Paul's letter to ***Philemon*** in the New Testament.)

Around ***61 A.D.***, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians at Colossae. Though he may not have visited them personally, he was eager to connect with them, encourage them, and caution them to hold firmly to the simple beauty of God's love and grace without becoming entangled in some complex religious system devised by mere men.

But as Paul wrote his letter, he was sitting in prison in ***Rome***. (Well, Paul experienced other imprisonments for sharing the good news of God's love amidst a hostile Roman Empire that it could have been written from someplace like ***Caesarea*** or ***Ephesus***, but it's more likely from his Roman imprisonment along with his letters to ***Philemon*** and the churches in ***Ephesus*** and ***Philippi***.)

The ***reason*** Paul wrote to the Colossians is in response to a visit from ***Epaphras***. Paul was given a report that even though the Colossian Christians were holding tight to their faith and sharing God's love with each other and with their community, like so many other churches in the region they were facing some strange influences from men who wanted

to mix up the simple purity of the gospel with... well... with man-made religions.

Astrology. Spiritual ***dietary*** rules. Odd ideas about ***how God communicates*** with us. The influence of ***eastern mysticism***. It was all there... much the way people hold to those things today.

There seems to have been influences from ***Greek mythology*** about the origin of the universe, and influences from ***Jewish legalism*** about needing to fulfill a list of do's and don'ts in order to make ourselves worthy of God's grace. There was even an influence of the philosophy of ***Gnosticism***, which put all the emphasis on what people ***know*** rather than what they ***experience*** (as if our actions are irrelevant, and possibly all of the tangible world was morally neutral; sin all you want, as long as you *know* good doctrine).

The Letter

So Paul wrote to the Colossians, and his letter focuses on a wondrous theme: ***the pre-eminence and all-sufficiency of Jesus***.

- The first part of the letter declares Christ as supreme over all things — all of creation, all of the church, and all of our lives.

- The second part of the letter defends the supremacy of Christ, warning against empty philosophies, against religious ceremonialism, and against man-made disciplines that merely *sound* spiritual.
- And the third part of the letter demonstrates the supremacy of Christ in our daily lives — our personal purity, our relationships with others, our endeavors to share God’s love with the world, and more.

Now, in the 1st century — long before the invention of the printing press — a church family would hear word that they’ve received a letter from someone like Paul. They would all come together so that the letter could be read aloud to the group. Eventually, the letter would be painstakingly copied over and over, and shared with other churches in the region (which is why we have more documented evidence for Christianity and the news of Jesus’ resurrection than any other development in ancient history — by a thousand-fold!).

But before that letter was copied and shared with others, God’s people would come together — much like we have here — and simply listen to the letter. Listen to the words of Paul. Listen to the message of God, the divine author behind Paul’s words, because...



All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness... (2 Timothy 3:16 ESV)



And, with this in mind, I'd like to simply *read* the letter to the Colossians in its entirety. Stripping away the **chapters and verses** (which were added later just so we could find our way around in the letter). Stripping away the **periscope** headings (those little blurbs that suggest what the next few paragraphs are about, which were added by translators for convenience). Just the simple text of a beautiful letter written to a gathering of believers just like us.

I don't want us to "miss the forest for the trees." As I said earlier, we'll **zoom in** to specific verses and ideas in the coming weeks, unpacking the wonders of this letter and talking about the implications for our lives.

But, for now, let's just listen to all of **Colossians**. (And, just to do something a little different, I'm going to read the **paraphrase** of the letter from Eugene Peterson's **The Message**. He captures the content of this letter beautifully, but does so using modern colloquialism that engages us in a fresh way.)

So... from nearly 2000 years ago, here is Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Colossians *(from The Message by Eugene Peterson)*

I, Paul, have been sent on special assignment by Christ as part of God's master plan. Together with my friend Timothy, I greet the Christians and stalwart followers of Christ who live in Colosse. May everything good from God our Father be yours!

Our prayers for you are always spilling over into thanksgivings. We can't quit thanking God our Father and Jesus our Messiah for you! We keep getting reports on your steady faith in Christ, our Jesus, and the love you continuously extend to all Christians. The lines of purpose in your lives never grow slack, tightly tied as they are to your future in heaven, kept taut by hope.

The Message is as true among you today as when you first heard it. It doesn't diminish or weaken over time. It's the same all over the world. The Message bears fruit and gets larger and stronger, just as it has in you. From the very first day you heard and recognized the truth of what God is doing, you've been hungry for more. It's as vigorous in you now as when you learned it from our friend and close associate Epaphras. He is one reliable worker for

Christ! I could always depend on him. He's the one who told us how thoroughly love had been worked into your lives by the Spirit.

Be assured that from the first day we heard of you, we haven't stopped praying for you, asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will, and so acquire a thorough understanding of the ways in which God works. We pray that you'll live well for the Master, making him proud of you as you work hard in his orchard. As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do *your* work. We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.

God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—*everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

You yourselves are a case study of what he does. At one time you all had your backs turned to God, thinking rebellious thoughts of him, giving him

trouble every chance you got. But now, by giving himself completely at the Cross, actually *dying* for you, Christ brought you over to God's side and put your lives together, whole and holy in his presence. You don't walk away from a gift like that! You stay grounded and steady in that bond of trust, constantly tuned in to the Message, careful not to be distracted or diverted. There is no other Message—just this one. Every creature under heaven gets this same Message. I, Paul, am a messenger of this Message.

I want you to know how glad I am that it's me sitting here in this jail and not you. There's a lot of suffering to be entered into in this world—the kind of suffering Christ takes on. I welcome the chance to take my share in the church's part of that suffering. When I became a servant in this church, I experienced this suffering as a sheer gift, God's way of helping me serve you, laying out the whole truth.

This mystery has been kept in the dark for a long time, but now it's out in the open. God wanted everyone, not just Jews, to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing. The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you,

so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God's glory. It's that simple. That is the substance of our Message. We preach *Christ*, warning people not to add to the Message. We teach in a spirit of profound common sense so that we can bring each person to maturity. To be mature is to be basic. Christ! No more, no less. That's what I'm working so hard at day after day, year after year, doing my best with the energy God so generously gives me.

I want you to realize that I continue to work as hard as I know how for you, and also for the Christians over at Laodicea. Not many of you have met me face-to-face, but that doesn't make any difference. Know that I'm on your side, right alongside you. You're not in this alone.

I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else. And we've been shown the mystery! I'm telling you this because I don't want anyone leading you off on some wild-goose chase, after other so-called mysteries, or "the Secret."

I'm a long way off, true, and you may never lay eyes on me, but believe me, I'm on your side, right beside you. I am delighted to hear of the careful and orderly ways you conduct your affairs, and impressed with the solid substance of your faith in Christ.

My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness

comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.

Entering into this fullness is not something you figure out or achieve. It's not a matter of being circumcised or keeping a long list of laws. No, you're already *in*—insiders—not through some secretive initiation rite but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin. If it's an initiation ritual you're after, you've already been through it by submitting to baptism. Going under the water was a burial of your old life; coming up out of it was a resurrection, God raising you from the dead as he did Christ. When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.

So don't put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services, or holy days. All

those things are mere shadows cast before what was to come; the substance is Christ.

Don't tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They're a lot of hot air, that's all they are. They're completely out of touch with the source of life, Christ, who puts us together in one piece, whose very breath and blood flow through us. He is the Head and we are the body. We can grow up healthy in God only as he nourishes us.

So, then, if with Christ you've put all that pretentious and infantile religion behind you, why do you let yourselves be bullied by it? "Don't touch this! Don't taste that! Don't go near this!" Do you think things that are here today and gone tomorrow are worth that kind of attention? Such things sound impressive if said in a deep enough voice. They even give the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic. But they're just another way of showing off, making yourselves look important.

So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, *act* like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along,

eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from *his* perspective.

Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your *real* life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. *He* is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ.

And that means killing off everything connected with that way of death: sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That's a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God. It's because of this kind of thing that God is about to explode in anger. It wasn't long ago that you were doing all that stuff and not knowing any better. But you know better now, so make sure it's all gone for good: bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk.

Don't lie to one another. You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now you're dressed in

a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions,

whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Wives, understand and support your husbands by submitting to them in ways that honor the Master.

Husbands, go all out in love for your wives. Don't take advantage of them.

Children, do what your parents tell you. This delights the Master no end.

Parents, don't come down too hard on your children or you'll crush their spirits.

Servants, do what you're told by your earthly masters. And don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ. The sullen servant who does shoddy work will be held responsible. Being a follower of Jesus doesn't cover up bad work.

And masters, treat your servants considerately. Be fair with them.

Don't forget for a minute that you, too, serve a Master—God in heaven.

Pray diligently. Stay alert, with your eyes wide open in gratitude. Don't forget to pray for us, that God will open doors for telling the mystery of Christ, even while I'm locked up in this jail. Pray that every time I open my mouth I'll be able to make Christ plain as day to them.

Use your heads as you live and work among outsiders. Don't miss a trick. Make the most of every opportunity. Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out.

My good friend Tychicus will tell you all about me. He's a trusted minister and companion in the service of the Master. I've sent him to you so that you would know how things are with us, and so he could encourage you in your faith. And I've sent Onesimus with him. Onesimus is one of you, and has become such a trusted and dear brother! Together they'll bring you up-to-date on everything that has been going on here.

Aristarchus, who is in jail here with me, sends greetings; also Mark, cousin of Barnabas (you received a letter regarding him; if he shows up, welcome him); and also Jesus, the one they call Justus. These are the only ones left from the old crowd who have stuck with me in working for God's kingdom. Don't think they haven't been a big help!

Epaphras, who is one of you, says hello. What a trooper he has been! He's been tireless in his prayers for you, praying that you'll stand firm, mature and confident in everything God wants you to do. I've watched him closely, and can report on how hard he has worked for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Luke, good friend and physician, and Demas both send greetings.

Say hello to our friends in Laodicea; also to Nympha and the church that meets in her house.

After this letter has been read to you, make sure it gets read also in Laodicea. And get the letter that went to Laodicea and have it read to you.

And, oh, yes, tell Archippus, "Do your best in the job you received from the Master. Do your very best."

I'm signing off in my own handwriting—Paul.
Remember to pray for me in this jail. Grace be with
you.

Conclusion

And there you have it — a 2000 year-old letter written to a group of people very much like you and me. Oh, they didn't have all the conveniences of modern technology and discovery...

- But they woke up every morning to ***go to work*** like we do.
- They lived in a climate of ***political uncertainty*** like we do.
- They were concerned about the increasing ***loss of religious freedom***, just like we do.
- They were surrounded by myriads of voices suggesting ***doubts*** or ***oppression*** to their faith, just like we do.

But, just like us, they were encouraged to hold tight to this very simple truth, as Paul wrote at the core of his letter:



Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God's glory. It's that simple... Christ!
No more, no less. *(Colossians 1:27-28 MSG)*

I look forward to exploring the wonders of this incredible letter with you in the weeks ahead as we discover victory, freedom, and immeasurable delight... all because of Christ. It really is that simple! 😊



PRAYER • **SONG:** *All Because of Jesus*