

COLOSSIANS: JESUS IS FIRST

For the first half of 2011 we’ll be studying the book of Colossians together. This guide is just a simple tool for you to go a bit deeper and understand some of the background on this letter to the church in Colossae (pronounced: *co-LAH–see*).

The overwhelming theme of Paul’s letter to the Colossian church is the supremacy of Jesus Christ in all things, and so we’ve titled this series, “Colossians: Jesus is First”. Our prayer is that throughout this series you would grow to make Jesus first in every area of your life, and that as a church we would grow more and more to glorify Jesus and make him look great!

1:10 Community Groups

This will be the first series for our launch of 1:10 Community Groups. 1:10 Groups will be a shift toward a new paradigm for our small group ministries.

1:10 Groups will be sermon-text based small groups. This means that every 1:10 Group will study through the text preached on the previous Sunday morning. 1:10s commit to meeting weekly or biweekly over the course of a semester and each 1:10 is asked to participate in some type of service project together each semester. 1:10 Community Group leaders are given specific training and encouragement to lead their groups well.

One of the great benefits of 1:10 Community Groups will be the unified vision and growth of all those participating. Every group will be studying the same things and moving in the same direction as a church family. Traditionally all of our small groups at Wawasee have done their own independent studies, each with a different focus, different vision, and different momentum... For Wawasee Bible to become part of a disciplemaking movement this needs to change. We need to grow as one unified body of believers. Over the coming months and years, 1:10 Groups will become an increasing area of focus as we aim to build momentum, grow together, make disciples, and build the Kingdom.

The name “1:10” was chosen appropriately from Colossians 1:10 where in some of his introductory comments to the church in Colossae, Paul writes about how he prays for the church there:

9And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. – Colossians 1:9-10 (ESV)

Verse 10 encapsulates the vision for our 1:10 Community Groups, that those who commit themselves to a group would grow together to 1) live a life pleasing to the Lord, bearing spiritual fruit, and 2) increase in their knowledge of God, both head and heart.

Beginning with this series, the message notes outline in the bulletin will also include 1:10 Group study questions each week. All of these questions will be available for download as well at wawaseebible.com under the “1:10 Groups” menu.

Traditional small groups will continue to meet and function, but many are making the transition into a 1:10 Community Group. Our hope would be that most if not all small groups will make the transition within 1-2 years. If you would like to learn more about our vision, feel free to contact Pastor Josh.

The Town of Colossae

Much like the Wawasee area, Colossae was a small agricultural town at the time Paul wrote this letter. Not very much beyond that is known about Colossae, though. Its location was discovered in 1835 by a man named William Hamilton, but the site has only been surveyed, never excavated archaeologically. Currently Flinders University of Australia is planning an excavation of the site.

Colossae was located about 110 miles east of Ephesus at the foot of Mt. Cadmus on the southern bank of the Lycus River. The Lycus is a southern tributary of the Meander River which known for its many curves (hence the English word “meander”, “wander”, “wind about”). The Lycus River Valley was a fertile area producing large crops of figs and olives. It also included lush grazing land on the slopes of the valley for large herds of sheep. It was in the area known as Phrygia, which is modern-day Turkey. By the time of the New Testament, Phrygia had become part of the Province of Asia in the Roman Empire. In Acts 19:10 when Paul says that “all in Asia” had heard the word of the Lord after his two years in Ephesus, Colossae would have been included in that statement.



Along with Colossae in the Lycus River Valley were the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. The area was prone to earthquakes and according to Eusebius (a church father and historian from the 4th century) Colossae was hit by a massive earthquake in 17 A.D. and then destroyed by another shortly after Paul wrote this letter (around 60-62 A.D.). Most scholars agree that the devastation from this second quake was so great that the city was never rebuilt.

In the 5th century B.C. Colossae had been a major trade center on the trade route from Sardis to Konya. It was listed in both the historical records of Herodotus and Xenophon as a large, prosperous city. Colossae was famous for a dark red wool cloth named after the city called *colossinum*. During the second Persian invasion of Greece (around 480 B.C.), Xerxes the Great and his armies stopped in Colossae en route to battle Sparta at Thermopylae.

The nearby city of Laodicea was founded around 260 B.C. only a few miles down river from Colossae by the Syrian king Antiochus II Theos, who named it after his wife, Laodice. When Laodicea became established in the 1st century B.C., Colossae began to fade in importance. It faded so much that as the birth of Jesus approached, an ancient geographer known as Strabo referred to Colossae as a “small town”. Laodicea grew into a great center of banking and finance and was one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world. In fact, when it was destroyed along with Colossae by the 60-62 A.D. earthquake, the people of Laodicea actually refused aid from the Roman Empire and quickly rebuilt the city from their own wealth. It’s likely that most of the people of Colossae who survived the quake moved the short distance to Laodicea rather than rebuild Colossae.

By the time the gospel spread to Colossae, the population there likely included a large number of Jews:

Josephus records that in the early part of the second century B.C., Antiochus III transplanted two thousand Jews from Mesopotamia to the districts of Lydia and Phrygia (Ant. 122.147-153). A Roman governor in the Lycus Valley district intercepted a shipment of gold being sent to Jerusalem to pay the temple tax. Calculating from the amount, the Jewish population has been estimated to be as high as 50,000 (Barclay, 1975a:93).[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Church in Colossae

It’s not clear exactly how or when the church in Colossae got started, but it is unlikely that Paul started it. While Paul mentions different people from the church in his letter, it is doubtful that he had ever actually been to Colossae, let alone started a church there. Colossians 1:7-8 would seem to support this as verse 8 records that it was through Epaphras that Paul became familiar with the work taking place in Colossae.

There is no explicit explanation either in the letter to the Colossians itself or in the book of Acts as to how the church first took root in Colossae. The most likely scenario is that Epaphras, a man from Colossae, became acquainted with Paul while he was in Ephesus. Paul had spent about 3 years in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, chronicled in Acts 18-19, preaching the gospel. In Acts 19:10 Luke says that the gospel had spread throughout all Asia on account of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. After becoming associated with Paul in Ephesus, Epaphras likely travelled home and spread the gospel he had learned and believed from Paul, resulting in a handful of churches being born in the Lycus River Valley. Based on this and the date of writing, Paul is writing to a very young church in Colossae, likely only 3-7 years old.

From studying the letter it seems likely that most of the Christians in Colossae were Gentiles,[[2]](#footnote-2) despite there being a large Jewish population in the region. Paul describes the conversion of Colossian believers in terms that would most likely apply more to Gentilesthan Jews. As Ephesians 2:12 describes, the Gentiles were “*separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*” (ESV) In light of that description of the Gentiles in Ephesians, look at how Paul describes the conversion of believers in Colossae:

**1:12** – *“[The Father] has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”*

**1:21** – *“And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,”*

**1:27** – Paul makes a point to say that it was “*among the Gentiles*” that the mystery of Christ had been revealed.

**3:5** – The list of sins here points to sins more typically struggled with by the Gentiles than with the Jews.

Dr. Douglas Moo of Wheaton College lists these same textual reasons in his commentary and goes on to list two arguments from silence that would point to (though not necessarily prove) a primarily Gentile audience: 1) The lack of any explicit Old Testament quotations in Colossians and 2) the lack of any explicit reference to the Law.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Author of Colossians

In the very first verse we’re told that Paul and Timothy wrote Colossians. Traditionally, then, most scholars have agreed that Paul is the author of Colossians. With the exception of occasional greetings in his own handwriting, most of Paul’s letters were likely scribed by a secretary (see Romans 16:22; 1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; and Philemon 19). For his letter to the Colossians and Philemon, this may well have been Timothy as he is mentioned in verse 1.

Paul was a passionate church planter and evangelist who had formerly been a Jewish Rabbi before coming to faith in Jesus. You can read about his conversion to Christianity in Acts 9. His former name was Saul and he was zealous for the Jewish faith. When Christianity was born after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, Paul spent a great deal of time and energy actively persecuting, arresting, and even killing Christians (Acts 22:4; 26:11; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13). Some of his evils are recorded toward the end of Acts 7 and the beginning of Acts 8 where Paul actually held the garments of those who murdered Stephen and we’re told that he approved his execution. In fact, it was while he was en route to the Syrian city of Damascus to arrest and persecute Christians there that the resurrected Jesus visibly and dramatically appeared to Paul, blinded him, and saved him. From that day forward Paul was a new man and went from imprisoning others for their faith in Jesus to being arrested and imprisoned himself for preaching the gospel. God used Paul maybe more than anyone else in history to spread the gospel and bring people to faith in Jesus.

Timothy was a young man who likely grew up in either Lystra or Derby, two Greek cities that were only a few miles apart. Timothy grew up in an ethnically and religiously mixed family. His mother was a Jewish woman who had come to faith in Jesus but his father was a Greek (Acts 16:1). It was likely that Timothy, his mother Eunice, and his grandmother Lois all came to faith during Paul’s first visit to the region in Acts 14:8-23. Acts 16:2-3 tells us that young Timothy was well spoken of by the people in Lyrstra and Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him in his ministry. Verse 3 tells us that before taking him along Paul had Timothy circumcised because of all the Jews in the region. Timothy’s father was a Greek and not a Jew, so Timothy had never been circumcised. Yet according to the law he was Jewish because of his mother. Paul always began his ministry in the towns he visited by preaching first in the synagogue, so he thought it best that Timothy be circumcised so as to maintain credibility with the Jewish people he ministered to. It would have been a hindrance for Paul to reach the Jewish population with the gospel had he brought an uncircumcised Jew along with him. Paul and Timothy eventually became so close that Paul was able to call him “*a true son in the faith*” (1 Timothy 1:2).

Did Paul REALLY write this letter?

There have been some scholars who have raised doubts that Paul really wrote Colossians, even though the letter was readily accepted by the early church as part of the New Testament canon without controversy. Moo points out that:

There is no shred of evidence that the Pauline authorship of the whole or any part of this epistle was ever disputed until the nineteenth century. It was at this time that the rise of historical criticism led to challenges of many traditionally accepted views of Scripture. The famous and influential German critic F.C. Baur rejected Pauline authorship, and the matter has been a topic of scholarly debate ever since.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Those who challenge Pauline authorship base their arguments on two observations from the text: ***1) The Style of Writing.*** Some scholars argue that when you study the Greek text, the style of writing used in the book of Colossians is inconsistent with the style Paul used in other letters he wrote. ***2) Theological Statements.*** Those who challenge the notion that Paul wrote this letter argue that some of the theological statements made in Colossians are much more advanced than those made in other letters from Paul. However, both of these arguments are easily refuted.

On the first argument (over style of writing), while we won’t delve into trying to explain the differences in Greek linguistics, it is a weak argument at best to say that differences in writing style between a handful of letters constitute a legitimate reason to doubt Paul’s authorship. We only have a small number of letters that Paul wrote, and one can hardly establish concrete evidence of his writing style and use of language from such a small sample size. Secondarily, in the sections of Colossians that these critics point to as evidence against Paul’s authorship, he seems to have purposefully departed from his normal style of writing to quote hymns (1:15-20) and codes of moral conduct (3:18 – 4:1) that some scholars argue would have been used by (and maybe even written by) the Colossians themselves. So in reality Paul is simply contextualizing his message to the Colossian people as any good pastor would. He is referencing things and writing in a way that they would have easily understood in their unique context.

Robert W. Wall makes a helpful statement:

In preaching or teaching from Paul’s letters, we must keep in mind that he did not write letters as academic briefs, devoid of passion and composed of unchanging ideas and universal truths for a fixed, permanent biblical canon. His letters always comprise a practical theology, for the apostle adapts the unchanging convictions of his gospel to the actual problems facing a particular congregation in practical and concrete ways. Paul is an itinerant missionary, not a professor of biblical studies! He writes his letters from a martyr’s prison, a missionary’s tent or a pastor’s office to address the spiritual need of the rank-and-file.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As to the second argument, that the theological statements found in Colossians seem more advanced than Paul’s statements elsewhere, it is weak in that it assumes Paul’s ideas, thoughts, and understanding of Christ never developed over time. It also ignores the fact that Paul may have been confronting issues at Colossae that required deeper theological instruction, and/or that the people of Colossae would have been in need of deeper theological instruction than recipients of his other letters. In any case, it’s important to note that while Paul’s theological statements in Colossians may go deeper than in other letters, nothing in Colossians stands in contradiction to Paul’s other teachings.

In further support of Pauline authorship is the fact that there is little dispute at all that Paul wrote the letter to Philemon. The letters to Philemon and to the church of Colossae are linked together in several ways as Philemon lived in Colossae. In fact, the letters were sent at the same time with Tychicus. Each letter’s greeting includes a list of people that is almost identical and both mention similar circumstances of imprisonment.

For these reasons, in addition to the Scriptural testimony, we hold that Paul was indeed the author of Colossians, writing with the assistance of Timothy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Where Did Paul Write From?

We know that Paul wrote this letter from prison (4:3, 18), but which imprisonment? We know from Acts that Paul spent time in prison in Caesarea (Acts 24) and Rome (Acts 27-28). Arguments have been made for both of these imprisonments as the origin of the letter. The traditional view is that Paul wrote Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians together while under house arrest in Rome.

Others speculate that Paul may have also been imprisoned for a time while in Ephesus (advocates of an Ephesian imprisonment point to 1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 18-10; 11:23 as possibly inferring such an imprisonment), arguing that he wrote the letter from there. This is an attractive option due to the proximity of Ephesus to Colossae, only about 100 miles. When you combine this with the fact that Onesimus is mentioned as being with Paul and being sent back to Colossae with Tychicus and this letter (4:7-9), a logical argument can be made for Paul writing from Ephesus.

Onesimus was likely a runaway slave who for whatever reason had a falling out with his master, Philemon, who lived in Colossae. Some argue that Onesimus was not a runaway slave but was sent by Philemon to minister to Paul on his behalf in prison, but the most likely option seems to be that Onesimus had run away. While on the run, Onesimus somehow came into contact with Paul while Paul was in prison and was with him when he writes this letter to the Colossian church. Along with his letter to the church in Colossae, Paul includes a personal letter to Philemon asking him to welcome Onesimus back, as he had become a follower of Jesus while he was away. Paul even offers to repay Philemon whatever debt (if any) was owed to him by Onesimus. Many use this story of Onesimus to bolster support for a potential Ephesian imprisonment, pointing to the proximity of Ephesus to Colossae (110 miles) vs. the likelihood of Onesimus running all the way to Rome (about 1500 miles).

In the end, the most likely options for the origin of this letter are either 1) Paul did in fact write this letter from Rome early in his Roman imprisonment, or 2) there was an unrecorded imprisonment in Ephesus and Paul wrote from there. In either case, while these matters might intrigue someone studying the background of Paul’s letters, they are of little significance when it comes to our understanding and application of the teaching of Colossians.

Date of Writing

As is discussed earlier, the town of Colossae resided in an area that was prone to earthquakes. Around 60-62 A.D. a devastating quake rocked the Lycus River Valley destroying nearby Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae. Laodicea and Hierapolis were quickly rebuilt, but it seems that Colossae was left in ruin as there are no historical documents after this date that reference Colossae. We can safely assume, then, that this letter was written prior to that earthquake. Most scholars seem to agree that it was written not long before that earthquake, close to 60 A.D.

Possible Timeline for Colossians



Occasion of Writing

As we look at why Paul wrote to the Colossians, it’s important to remember that the letters of the New Testament were written for a specific reason, to a specific person or group of people. Some of these letters (including Colossians) were written to entire churches (in this case the church in Colossae). Each would have been read publicly to the entire church and in some cases then circulated to other churches.

It’s important to note that these “church letters” and the teaching within them were directed at *everyone*. N.T. Wright (a brilliant scholar with whom we would disagree on some things) rightly points out, “These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. *They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.*”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Keep this in mind as we study Colossians together. God intends Paul’s teaching here to reach and transform everyone in our church, young and old, by the power of the Holy Spirit with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is as applicable to you today as it was the small church in Colossae when Paul originally wrote it.

The False Teaching in Colossae

The letter to the Colossians makes no explicit statement as to why Paul wrote it. But many warnings in the letter (2:4, 8, 16, 18) make it clear that Paul wanted the Colossians to steer clear of some type of erroneous teaching. Paul seems to take on the well-worn strategy that “the best defense is a good offense” and fills his letter with encouragements to be disciplined, remain firm in their faith, and hold tightly to what they had been taught (2:5, 7-8). Paul also regularly references the power of the gospel (1:5-8, 23, 29; 2:2; 3:1-2, 16) and its sufficiency for believers to live this way. Paul’s direct teaching on the power, authority, eternality, and sufficiency of Jesus and his work on the cross would bolster this strategy as well (1:15-20).

While it is clear that Paul writes to combat some type of false teaching in Colossae, he never specifically names the false teachers or describes the actual teaching as he does in his other letters.[[8]](#footnote-8) Instead his warnings are generalities about “no one” (2:4, 18) or “anyone” (2:8; 16). We can determine, though, that Paul implies at least some people in Colossae were adopting and/or advocating a way of Christianity that stood in contrast to what Epaphras had clearly taught them. Paul sees the ultimate danger in such teaching being that it either ignores or does not fully understand the sufficiency and authority of Jesus in all things (2:8-15, 16, 19, 20).

If we understood exactly what the false teaching in Colossae was, we would be able to more accurately interpret this letter. But God in his infinite wisdom has not revealed that to us, and instead leaves us with teaching from Paul that we are able to apply to our unique situations and circumstances of life. Moo describes it well:

“Although the prescription for cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present-day reader of Colossians, the ailment defies a really detailed diagnosis on his part.” (Lincoln, 561) Such an uncertain conclusion is disappointing in some respects but is, in another respect, hermeneutically fruitful. For it means that we can apply Paul’s teaching in the letter to a wide variety of historical and contemporary movements that share the general contours of the false teaching.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Three Primary Views on the False Teaching

Over the years, scholars have proposed and pieced together all kinds of potential explanations of what exactly Paul is combatting in Colossians. In his commentary, David Garland describes all of the different views this way,

“When one examines all the conflicting proposals by scholars who muster impressive primary evidence to buttress their arguments, the conflicting accounts resemble the story of blind men trying to describe an elephant when they are touching different parts of the animal.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

In other words, many have come at the issue from different angles yielding an array of ideas as to what exactly the problem was. The important thing to remember is that Paul is not writing to tell us about the problem, he is writing to exhort Christians to live lives that cling fully to the power and sufficiency of Jesus in all things. So while these potential explanations may be of interest to us, they are not ultimate and do not alter how we apply the teaching of Colossians to our everyday lives.

Out of all the differing explanations, three have traditionally risen to the top of the list: Gnosticism, Judaism, and Syncretism. A very brief explanation of each follows.

**1. Gnosticism.** Over the last 50-100 years the prevailing thought among scholars was that Paul was combatting Gnosticism and/or some type of Jewish Mysticism in his letter to the Colossians. This conclusion is rooted primarily in Paul’s use of the phrase “worship of angels” in 2:18. In a nutshell, Gnosticism taught that the world was created and ruled by a “lesser deity” (the demiurge) and that Jesus was an ambassador of the greater, mysterious, and supreme deity who was yet unknown. It was, then, by possessing some esoteric, mysterious, or special knowledge of Jesus that enabled a person to be saved. In recent years Gnosticism (or even its precursory ideas) has come to be a very unlikely explanation of the problem in Colossae. This is because recent archaeological evidence in Egypt and other places has confirmed that the ideas and teachings of Gnosticism were not fully developed until sometime well into the second century, B.C., 100 years after the writing of this letter.

**2. Judaism.**  James Dunn is one of the leading proponents of the Colossian “philosophy” being nothing more than regular Judaism. He argues that Paul’s exhortation against a false teaching in Colossians can be easily understood by comparing it against a background of standard Jewish teaching. Dunn compares the parallels between Colossians and Galatians, where all scholars agree the false teaching had Jewish underpinnings. Here are a few of the parallels: discussion of circumcision (Col. 2:11, 13; 3:11); Paul’s rant against the “elements of the world” (Col. 2:8, 20; Gal. 4:3, 9 – the only other place this language is used by Paul); observance of Jewish food laws and holy days (Col. 2:16, 2:11-14; Gal 4:10); purity issues (Col 2:20-23; Gal. 2:11-14); interest in angels in connection with the law (Col. 2:14-15; Gal. 2:11-14). Dunn also sees illusions to Old Testament teaching that suggests Paul is claiming Christians to be legitimate heirs of Old Testament promises (1:12-14; 3:12).[[11]](#footnote-11) All of Dunn’s arguments are very persuasive as he points to the problem being one of solely Jewish origin, or of at least significant Jewish origin. Garland also gives a solid set of introductory observations directly from the text that point to the problem being one of Jewish origin.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**3. Syncretism**. A third possibility is that the false teaching Paul is combating is a syncretism, or a syncing, of numerous cultural and religious beliefs with Christianity. Clearly one of the big players in this syncretic mix was Judaism as Paul references many Jewish rituals and holy days in chapter 2, but good argument can be made that there was more than just this Jewish element. Clinton Arnold has given the most thorough treatment of this possibility. He argues,

“The Colossian ‘philosophy’ … represents a combination of Phrygian folk belief, local folk Judaism, and Christianity. The local folk belief has some distinctive Phrygian qualities, but it also has much in common with what we could also describe as magic or ritual power.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Based on his thorough study of local Phrygian beliefs, Arnold’s full argument is very persuasive. It is also attractive in that a syncretic proposal like his is very much in line with sinful human nature and the realities of how many people form their religious beliefs. Few people hold a “pure” form of any religion or philosophy, but instead a set of beliefs drawn from a variety of religious, cultural, and experiential sources.

In our study of Colossians, we will hold tentatively to the third explanation that the problem Paul is combating is some type of syncretism, the bulk of which derives from local Jewish influence as Dunn suggests. One thing that is clear is that Paul is writing to assure the Colossian believers of their faith in Christ. To assure them that they lack nothing and that Jesus alone is sufficient.

Main Themes of Colossians

*The following chart of some of the main themes Paul teaches on in Colossians is borrowed from the ESV Study Bible:*

1. Jesus Christ is preeminent over all creation, Lord over all human rulers and cosmic powers. (1:15-20; 2:9-10; 3:1)

2. God has worked through Christ to secure redemption and reconciliation for all who put their faith in him. (1:13-14, 20-22)

3. Believers are in Christ and thus participate in a relationship of solidarity with Christ in his death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, his new life, and his fullness. (2:9-14; 3:1-4)

4. Christ has defeated the powers of darkness on the cross, and Christians share in his power and authority over that realm. (2:10, 15; see also 2:8, 20)

5. Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish expectation, and Christians now share in the heritage of the old covenant people of God through their union with him. (1:12, 21-22, 27)

6. Believers are called to grow in maturity in Christ by getting rid of sinful practices and cultivating Christian virtues. (1:10-12, 28; 3:1-4:6)

Outline of Colossians

*Below is an outline of Colossians taken from the ESV Study Bible:*

I. Greeting (1:1–2)

II. Thanksgiving (1:3–8)

III. Prayer (1:9–14)

IV. Praise to Christ (1:15–20)

a. Christ is Lord of creation (1:15–17)

b. Christ is Lord of redemption (1:18–20)

V. Reconciliation of the Colossians to God (1:21–23)

VI. The Apostle Paul’s Labor for the Gospel (1:24–2:3)

a. Paul’s suffering and stewardship of the mystery (1:24–28)

b. Paul’s labor for the Colossians (1:29–2:3)

VII. The Dangerous Teaching at Colossae (2:4–23)

a. Warning about a deceptive teaching (2:4–8)

b. Help for the danger: resources in Christ (2:9–15)

c. Additional warnings about the teaching (2:16–23)

**VIII. The Proper Focus: Christ and the Life Above (3:1–4)**

**IX. Instructions on Living the Christian Life (3:5–4:6)**

a. Dealing with the sins of the past (3:5–11)

b. Putting on the virtues of Christ (3:12–17)

c. Living in the Christian household (3:18–4:1)

d. Persistence in prayer (4:2–4)

e. Good behavior toward those outside the community (4:5–6)

**X. Personal Greetings and Instructions (4:7–17)**

a. Remarks about the messengers carrying the letter (4:7–9)

b. Greetings from Paul’s associates (4:10–14)

c. Greetings to the Christians in Laodicea (4:15–17)

**XI. Letter Closing (4:18)**

People mentioned in Colossians

**Paul & Timothy** – Discussion on who Paul and Timothy were can be found above under the section on Authorship on pages 6-7.

**Epaphras** – Epaphras, whose name means “love”, is only mentioned three times in the New Testament, twice in Colossians (1:7; 4:12) and once in Philemon (23), but was a man of great faith who appears to have been held in high regard by Paul. It is likely that Epaphras met Paul in Ephesus, became a Christian, then traveled to his home in Colossae and spread the gospel throughout the Lycus River Valley cities of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Epaphras was a faithful man God raised up to plant a church in his home town, pastor it, care for the people, and oversee its growth and that of other churches in the area.

**Tychicus** – Tychicus is mentioned five times in the New Testament. He was a native of Asia Minor (modern Turkey – Colossae would have been part of this area) and travelled with Paul on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:4). Tychicus and Onesimus actually carried the letter of Colossians from Paul to Colossae and were to tell the church there about Paul’s condition (Colossians 4:7). Paul also sent Tychicus to Ephesus (2 Timothy 4:12, Ephesians 6:21) and possibly to Crete (Titus 3:12). Tradition holds that he died a martyr.

**Onesimus** – Onesimus was a slave for whom Paul wrote his letter to Philemon. He is only mentioned in Philemon and Colossians. In his letter to Philemon (which was likely sent along with this letter to the Colossians), Paul pled with Philemon to free Onesimus because he had become so helpful to Paul. The traditional view on Onesimus is that he had robbed his master, escaped, met Paul, and became a Christian. When Paul sends him back to Philemon, he urges him to treat Onesimus no longer as his slave but as a Christian brother (16). Some traditions connect Onesimus with a bishop of that name in the second-century church and with Onesiphorus in 2 Timothy 1:16. However, neither connection has been very well proven. More is written about Onesimus above in the section on Authorship on page 9.

**Aristarchus** – Aristarchus was a faithful companion of Paul mentioned 5 times in the New Testament. He was caught by the followers of Artemis during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and was in prison with Paul as he wrote the letter to the Colossians (4:10). He was likely from Thessalonica and accompanied Paul from Greece to Jerusalem as he returned from his third missionary journey (Acts 20:4). He also travelled with Paul when he sailed to Rome (Acts 27:2). Later church tradition said Nero put Aristarchus to death in Rome.

**Mark** – Mark started out with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey in Acts 12:25, but we find out in Acts 13:13 that he left the trip for unknown reasons. Barnabas and Mark were cousins and in Acts 15:37-41 when Paul refuses to take Mark with him again, Barnabas also leaves Paul to journey together with Mark and preach the gospel. Mark also worked with Peter (Acts 12:12-13; 1 Peter 5:13). Later Paul and Mark were reconciled (Philemon 24) and Mark went on to pen the Gospel of Mark.

**Barnabas** – Barnabas is mentioned as Mark’s cousin in Colossians 4:10. His name appears 23 times in Acts and 5 times in Paul’s letters. In Acts, Barnabas was a Levite and native of the island of Cyprus named Joseph before the disciples called him Barnabas. He sold his property and gave the money to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37). He first introduced Saul of Tarsus (Paul) to the church in Jerusalem as well (Acts 9:26-27). He was chosen by the church to go investigate the preaching to Gentiles in Antioch where he became a leader and took Paul as his assistant. Later they would take famine relief to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:19-30). For Paul’s first missionary journey, Barnabas may have been the original leader (Acts 13-14). Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to try and settle the question of how Gentiles could be saved and how Jewish Christians could fellowship with them (Acts 15:1-21). The planned for a second missionary journey, but disagreed about bringing along Barnabas’s cousin Mark. In the end they split apart and Barnabas took Mark on a separate gospel preaching journey (Acts 15:36-41). In the third century Barnabas was identified by Clement of Alexandria as one of the 70 sent out by Jesus in Luke 10:1. Church father Tertullian later claimed Barnabas to be the author of Hebrews.

**Jesus who is called Justus** – All we really know is that he was a minister with Paul.

**Luke** – Luke was a physician who travelled with Paul and wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, penning the Gospel of Luke and it’s follow-up volume, the Book of Acts. He travelled extensively with Paul and even sat with him in prison.

**Demas** – Demas was a companion of Paul’s who was faithful for a while, but later deserted Paul because he “loved the things of this life” (2 Timothy 4:10)

**Nympha** – A woman mentioned only here in Colossians who opened her house for the church (or part of the church, like a 1:10 Community Group) to meet in.

**Archippus** – Archippus is only mentioned here in Colossians 4:17 and in Philemon 2. In Philemon Paul calls him a “fellow soldier”. Paul exhorts him to finish the ministry God has given him in Colossians 4:17 and not to give up as so many do.

Preaching Schedule for colossians

*Below is our tentative schedule for working through the book of Colossians together. There is potential that it could change a bit as we progress.*

**Date Passage Preaching**

January 2, 2011 Introduction & 1:1-2 Pastor Josh

January 9, 2011 Colossians 1:3-8 Pastor Josh

January 16, 2011 Colossians 1:9-10 Pastor Josh

January 23, 2011 Colossians 1:11-14 Pastor Josh

January 30, 2011 Colossians 1:15a Pastor Josh

February 6, 2011 Colossians 1:15b-16 Pastor Josh

February 13, 2011 *TBA* Tom Speicher

February 20, 2011 Colossians 1:17 Pastor Josh

February 27, 2011 Colossians 1:18a Pastor Josh

March 6, 2011 Colossians 1:18b Pastor Josh

March 13, 2011 *TBA* Tom Speicher

March 20, 2011 Colossians 1:19-20 Pastor Josh

March 27, 2011 Colossians 1:21-23 Pastor Josh

April 3, 2011 Colossians 1:24-2:5 Pastor Josh

April 10, 2011 Philemon Pastor Tim Cressman

Palm Sunday

April 17, 2011 Colossians 2:6-10 Pastor Josh

Easter Sunday

April 24, 2011 Colossians 2:12-15 Pastor Josh

May 1, 2011 Colossians 2:16-23 Pastor Josh

May 8, 2011 Colossians 3:1-11 Pastor Josh

May 15, 2011 Colossians 3:12-17 Pastor Josh

May 22, 2011 Colossians 3:18-22 Pastor Josh

May 29, 2011 Colossians 3:23-4:1 Pastor Josh

Graduate Recognition

June 5, 2011 Colossians 4:2-6 Pastor Josh

June 12, 2011 Colossians 4:7-18 Pastor Josh

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*Electronic editions of the following resources were also used via Accordance Bible Software (www.accordancebible.org):*

The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003)

The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary

Life Application Study Bible Notes

Expositors Bible Commentary

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1. Ernest D. Martin, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Colossians & Philemon* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A Gentile simply refers to anyone who is not Jewish. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Douglas J. Moo, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Moo, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert W. Wall, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Colossians & Philemon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Moo gives an in-depth yet very readable treatment of the authorship question in the introduction to his commentary, 28-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), ix. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Galatians 1:8; 4:17; 5:12; 6:12-13; 2 Corinthians 11:4-5, 13-15, 20-23; 12:11; Philippians 3:2, 18-19; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-3; 6:3-5 for examples [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Moo, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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12. Garland, 25-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief in Colossae* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)