

THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

Introduction

Colossians is perhaps the most Christ-centered book in the Bible. In it Paul stresses the preeminence of the Person of Christ and the completeness of the salvation He provides.

Author

The external testimony to the Pauline authorship of Colossians is ancient and consistent. The internal evidence is also very good; it not only claims to have been written by Paul (1:1, 23; 4:18), but the personal details and close parallels with Ephesians and Philemon strengthen the case.

Nevertheless, the authenticity of this letter has been challenged on the ground of vocabulary and thought. In its four chapters, Colossians uses fifty-five Greek words that do not appear in Paul's other epistles. The high Christology of Colossians has been compared to John's later concept of Christ as the Creator *Logos* (1:15–23; cf. John 1:1–18), with the conclusion that these concepts were too late for Paul's time. Also, it is sometimes argued that the Colossian heresy is a type of Gnosticism prevalent in the second-century A.D.

We must recognize, however, that Paul commanded a wide vocabulary, and the unique topics addressed in this letter, particularly the Colossian heresy, account for the vocabulary of the epistle. In addition, there is no reason to assume that Paul was unaware of Christ's work as Creator, especially in view of Philippians 2:5–11. Finally, the information regarding the Colossian heresy in chapter 2 points rather to what was probably an early form of Gnosticism, rather than full-fledged Gnosticism of the second century variety.

Date

Paul wrote this epistle from prison, as he did Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. Although Caesarea and Ephesus have been suggested as possible locations of authorship, the bulk of evidence suggests that Paul wrote it in A.D. 60 or 61 during his first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16–31) and sent it with Tychicus and the converted slave Onesimus to Colosse (4:7–9; cf. Eph 6:21; Philem. 10–12).

Colosse was a minor city about one hundred miles east of Ephesus in the region of the seven Asian churches of Revelation 1–3. Located in the fertile Lycus Valley on the road from Ephesus to the east, Colosse had previously been a populous center of commerce, but by the time of Paul it had been eclipsed in importance by the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Apart from this letter, Colosse exerted almost no influence on early church history.

The precise character of the Colossian heresy has been a matter of debate. The nature of this heresy can only be deduced from Paul's incidental references to it in his refutation in 2:8–23. It was apparently a religious system that combined elements from Hellenistic Greek speculation (2:4, 8–10), Jewish legalism (2:11–17), and Oriental mysticism (2:18–23). It involved a low view of the body (2:20–23) and probably of nature as a whole. With its stress upon the importance of circumcision, dietary regulations, and ritual observances, together with its worship of angels and preoccupation with mystical experiences, the Colossian heresy denied the sufficiency of Christ, and any attempt to fit Christ into such a system would undermine His Person and redemptive work.

Themes and Literary Structure

The resounding theme in Colossians is the preeminence and sufficiency of Christ in all things. The believer is complete in Him alone and lacks nothing because “in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (2:9). The first part of the epistle is an exposition of Christ’s supremacy (chs. 1–2); the second part explains the implications of Christ’s supremacy in terms of the believer’s submission to Christ the Lord (chs. 3–4).

Particularly in the second half of the epistle, Paul explores the implications of the believer’s union with Christ. The believer’s union with Christ in His death, resurrection and exaltation is the foundation upon which earthly life must be built (3:1–4). Because of their death with Christ, Christians must regard themselves as dead to the old way of sin (3:5–11); because of their resurrection with Christ, believers must regard themselves as alive to Him in righteousness and must put on the new qualities that are prompted by Christian love (3:12–17). The new life in Christ is to be manifested in the personal relationships of the Christian. Paul provides specific instructions for husbands and wives, children, servants, and masters (3:18–4:1).

OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS

Part One: The Supremacy of Christ in the Church (1:1–2:23)

- I. Introduction 1:1–14**
 - A. Paul’s Greeting to the Colossians 1:1, 2
 - B. Paul’s Thanksgiving for the Colossians 1:3–8
 - C. Paul’s Prayer for the Colossians 1:9–14
- II. The Preeminence of Christ 1:15–2:3**
 - A. Christ Is Preeminent in Creation 1:15–18
 - B. Christ Is Preeminent in Redemption 1:19–23
 - C. Christ Is Preeminent in the Church 1:24–2:3
- III. The Freedom in Christ 2:4–23**
 - A. Freedom from Enticing Words 2:4–7
 - B. Freedom from Vain Philosophy 2:8–10
 - C. Freedom from the Judgment of Men 2:11–17
 - D. Freedom from Improper Worship 2:18, 19
 - E. Freedom from the Doctrine of Men 2:20–23

Part Two: The Submission to Christ in the Church (3:1–4:18)

- I. The Position of the Believer 3:1–4**
- II. The Practice of the Believer 3:5–4:6**
 - A. Put Off the Old Man 3:5–11
 - B. Put On the New Man 3:12–17
 - C. Personal Commands for Holiness 3:18–4:6
- III. Conclusion 4:7–18**
 - A. Commendation of Tychicus 4:7–9
 - B. Greetings from Paul’s Friends 4:10–14
 - C. Introductions Regarding This Letter 4:15–18 ¹

¹Thomas Nelson, Inc., *Nelson’s complete book of Bible maps and charts: Old and New Testament [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1996.

Lesson 1 - Colossians 1:1-29

Open It

What person comes to mind when you think of greatness?

Explore It

1. Who was with Paul when he wrote this letter? (1:1)
2. Why did Paul offer prayers of thanksgiving for the Colossians? (1:3-4)
3. From what source did the believers' faith and love spring? (1:5)
4. What did Epaphras tell Paul and Timothy about the Colossians? (1:7-8)
5. What was Paul's primary prayer for these Christians? (1:9)
6. What results did Paul want for the Colossians? (1:10)
7. How does God enable believers to share in His inheritance? (1:12-14)
8. What is Christ's relationship to Creation? (1:15-17)
9. What is Christ's relationship to the church? (1:18)
10. What did God achieve through the work of His Son? (1:20)
11. Why was reconciliation necessary? (1:21-22)
12. What is the role of faith in reconciliation with God? (1:23)
13. Why did Paul rejoice? (1:24)
14. What stewardship did God give Paul? (1:25)
15. To what mystery did Paul refer? (1:26)
16. To whom had God chosen to make known a mystery? (1:27)
17. How did Paul help believers become spiritually mature? (1:28-29)

Apply It

What would aid you from being moved away from your hope of the gospel?

Lesson 2 - Colossians 2:1-23

Open It

In what ways would you characterize yourself as permissive, and in what ways would you characterize yourself as strict?

Explore It

1. What did Paul want his audience to know? (2:1)
2. What is hidden in Christ? (2:3)
3. How would a commitment to the full knowledge of Christ protect the Colossians? (2:4)
4. What delighted Paul? (2:5)
5. How did Paul tell the Colossians to continue in Christ? (2:6-7)
6. What false teaching was Paul concerned about? (2:8)
7. What did Paul affirm about Christ? How? (2:9-10)
8. Why do Gentile Christians have no need to conform to Jewish rules and regulations? (2:11-12)
9. How did the Cross cancel the written code? (2:13-14)
10. From what did Christ deliver us? How? (2:15-17)
11. How did Christ fulfill what the Old Testament foreshadowed? (2:17)
12. What were the characteristics of the false teachers? (2:18-19)
13. How did Paul challenge the legalism that had infected the church? (2:20-21)
14. What are the failings of human commands and teachings? (2:20-23)

Apply It

This week, how can you best exercise the freedom you have in Christ?

Lesson 3 - Colossians 3:1-17

Open It

What kinds of things do you normally think about?

Explore It

1. What did Paul tell the Colossians to seek? (3:1)
2. Where did Paul tell the believers to focus their thinking? (3:2)
3. What was the Colossians' security? (3:3)
4. Why should believers look forward to Christ's return? (3:4)
5. Why is God's wrath coming? (3:5-6)
6. What did the Colossians need to put off? (3:7-9)
7. What did the Colossians need to put on? (3:10)
8. What distinctions are removed in Christ? (3:11)
9. How were the Colossian believers called to clothe themselves? (3:12-14)
10. Why did Paul call on the believers to be peaceful and thankful? (3:15-16)
11. What should we do? How? (3:17)
12. What is one principle that ought to guide everything we do? (3:17)

Apply It

Which of God's goals for holy living do you need to apply to your life this week?

Lesson 4 - Colossians 3:18-4:18

Open It

If you were to make up a slogan that describes your family, what would it be?

Explore It

1. What should wives do? (3:18)
2. What should husbands do? (3:19)
3. How should children respond to parents? (3:20)
4. Of what do fathers need to be careful? (3:21)
5. What directives did Paul give servants? (3:22-25)
6. What instructions did Paul give masters? (4:1)
7. What did Paul prescribe for all believers? (4:2)
8. What request did Paul make of his readers? (4:3-4)
9. What did Paul say about the Christian's interaction with non-Christians? (4:5-6)
10. How should believers speak to others? (4:6)
11. Who was Tychicus? (4:7)
12. Why did Paul send Tychicus and Onesimus to Colosse? (4:7-8)
13. What did Epaphras do on behalf of the church at Colosse? (4:12-13)
14. What relationship did Luke and Demas have to Paul? (4:14)
15. To whom did Paul send greetings? (4:15)
16. Where did Paul want his letter read? (4:16)
17. What instruction did Paul send Archippus? (4:17)
18. How did Paul conclude his letter? (4:18)

Apply It

What is one way you can improve the way you treat each member of your family?