

1 Colossians Overview

1. Written by whom?
Paul the Apostle (the author of twelve other books of the New Testament). All earliest church leaders believed Paul wrote Colossians – no one has seriously argued against this.
2. Written when and where?
From prison (house arrest) during the beginning of his first imprisonment in Rome between 60-62 AD. Paul was under arrest for two years in Rome with a 24 hour guard (Acts 28:16,30) and was then probably released due to his accusers having a weak case against him.
3. Written to whom?
To the Christians at the church in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). This church had been planted by Epaphras, who was most likely converted by Paul. Colossae had been an important city at one time, but by the time of Paul it was mostly a backwater town. It was a diverse city, with Syrians, Judeans, Greeks, Romans, Scythians, and Phrygians.
4. What form?
Letter of instruction and teaching, including an emphasis on the erasing of the distinction between enslaved and free people.
5. What's it about?
Jesus is supreme. Any 'gospel' that teaches otherwise is wrong. The Colossian believers need to remember what they learned and lived, resisting false teachers to focus on the reality of Christ. In order to help them, Paul goes over the value of living carefully and wisely.
6. Written for what purpose?
 - To proclaim Jesus Christ as the source of all – the power behind all creation
 - To counteract some powerful and dangerous teachings
 - To urge Christians to reject any teaching that lowers Christ
 - To encourage them to live wisely, faithfully and devotedly

2 Colossians Chapter 1 – Scripture Questions

1. What sort of reputation did the Colossians have? (vs. 4)
2. Why did Paul pray that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will? (vs. 10)
3. He (the Father) has delivered us from the dominion of _____ and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he _____, in whom we have redemption, the _____ of sins. (vs. 14)
4. Match these: Christ is the (vs. 15-16):
Image of All Creation
First Born of The Invisible God
5. Jesus was the head of the church, the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead—for what purpose? (vs. 18)
6. What was the relationship like between God and believers? (vs. 21)
7. How was the reconciliation brought about? (vs. 22)
8. Paul says, "This is the _____ that you heard." (vs. 23)
9. How does Paul describe Christ's body? (vs. 24)
10. What was the 'mystery' that was kept hidden for 'ages and generations'? (vs. 27)

The false teachers in Colossae used words that have different meanings for Christians.

1. **Fullness.** To the Gnostics, 'fullness' meant the sum of the supernatural forces controlling the fate of people. For Paul, 'fullness' meant the totality of God with all his powers and attributes.
2. **Mystery.** This popular, pagan religious term referred to secret information available only to an exclusive group of people. Paul changes that meaning by always combining it with words such as 'disclosed', 'made known', 'made plain'. The Christian mystery is not secret knowledge for a few. It is a revelation of divine truths, once hidden but now openly proclaimed.

3 Colossians Chapter 1 – What did it mean to them?

Paul wrote this letter from Rome, where he was under house arrest. Most likely he wrote it after the arrival of Epaphras, who was the minister to the church in Colossae. While the letter doesn't directly address the tenets of the 'strange teaching' that was troubling the congregation, it is possible to make out the broad outlines. The false teachings claimed to be a philosophy, placing emphasis on ritual circumcision, dietary laws and the observance of holy days. They appeared to believe in various supernatural powers, and that these powers had to be worshipped in order for a person to be saved. As a result, Christ was placed in a relatively minor position. Some taught that the body was evil and must be treated as an enemy. Most dangerous, these 'teachers' claimed to be Christian.

The system being taught in Colossae was an early form of Gnosticism. It was a combination of Judaism, paganism and Christianity. Gnosticism, in all its forms, was characterized by belief in the evil of matter, in mediating beings, and in salvation through knowledge. This belief in the basic evil of matter made it impossible for the Gnostics to accept the real incarnation of God in Christ. Some explained it away by saying that Jesus only SEEMED to be human. Others explained it by saying that he was ONLY human. Belief that matter is evil also created a distorted view of the Christian life. Some turned to asceticism; they felt that they had to free themselves from the influence of matter (the body) by punishing their physical forms. Others went the opposite way, the idea being that since only the soul mattered, the body was free to do whatever it pleased.

The word Gnosticism is related to gnosis, "knowledge". It taught that salvation did not come through faith but through knowledge. This knowledge was acquired through mystical experiences. It was an occult knowledge, full of the superstitions of astrology and magic.

There was a 'christian' element mixed into the teachings at Colossae. At the heart it was a combination of Judaism and paganism, but they did acknowledge Christ. They did, however, dethrone him. He was given a place in their system, but not the supreme place.

Paul's reason for writing to Colossae was threefold: (1) to express his personal interest in the church, (2) to warn them against reverting to their old, pagan ways, and (3) to put down the false teaching that was threatening the Colossian church.

The Colossian Heresy

Most scholars see in the letter to the Colossians evidence of a heretical group that was pressuring true believers there to adopt their teachings. Paul labels these teachings as “hollow and deceptive philosophy,” based on “human traditions”. Judging from the content of this letter, the following appear to be the main teachings of the heretics and Paul’s answers to them.

TEACHING

PAUL’S ANSWER

Emphasis on worship of angels, called ‘thrones,’ ‘rulers,’ ‘powers,’ and ‘authorities’.

Christ created these powers and he rules over them; believers are delivered from their power.

Angels are intermediaries between God and human beings.

Christ is the only mediator we need.

Accepted submission to the ‘basic principles of the world’.

Christ rules over them, and Christians have died to them in Christ.

Endorsed circumcision.

Believers undergo a form of circumcision in the death of Christ, experienced through baptism.

Endorsed special religious days and legalistic food rules.

Do not listen to such rules or force them on others; believers have died to them and their power is cancelled.

Emphasis on a special, secret knowledge.

Through the Holy Spirit, God fills all believers with his wisdom, knowledge and understanding.

This table taken from Zondervan NIV BIBLE COMMENTARY, Volume 2: New Testament, page 823.

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Colossians Chapter 1 – Application Questions

1. What kind of lives are pleasing to God? How do I know if my life is pleasing to God? How do we know if our church is pleasing to God?
2. The Colossians had no trouble believing in supernatural beings. Paul doesn't expect to get any pushback from them about Christ's position in eternity. How do you feel about the whole 'supernatural' realm? How do we reconcile this world we cannot see with the world at our fingertips?
3. It's easy to see efforts around us to minimize, sanitize, and use Jesus. What can we do to keep his majesty and supremacy in mind? How do we protect ourselves from making him over into our own image?

6 Colossians Chapter 2 – Scripture Questions

1. What was Paul's purpose for the Colossians? (vs. 2) That they may be:
 - a. Encouraged in _____
 - b. United in _____
 - c. Have the full riches of _____
 - d. Know the _____

3. What was the mystery of God? (vs. 3) _____

4. On what did the "hollow and deceptive philosophy" depend? (vs. 8)
 - a. Human _____ and basic _____ of the world

4. In whom do we have fullness? (vs. 10) _____

5. How is spiritual circumcision described? (vs. 11-12)
 - a. Done by the _____
 - b. Buried with him _____
 - c. Raised with him _____
 - a. In baptism
 - b. Through faith
 - c. Hands of Christ

8. How did God make us alive in Christ? (vs. 13-15)
 - a. Forgave our _____
 - b. Cancelled the _____
 - c. Disarmed the _____

10. Where is reality found? (vs. 17) _____

11. What had the people with 'unspiritual minds' lost connection with? (vs. 19) _____

12. What is destined to 'perish with use'? Why will it perish? (vs. 20-23)

"Basic principles", as used here by Paul, means false, worldly, religious, elementary teachings. He was counteracting the false teachings heard by the Colossians which, in part, taught that for salvation you needed to combine faith in Christ with secret knowledge and man-made regulations. These rules usually concerned physical practices such as circumcision, observing religious festivals, and regulations about what was allowed in food and drink.

7 Colossians Chapter 2 – What It Meant To Them

I'm praying hard for all of you. I want you to be encouraged and stand together so that you can really understand what God has done for you. Don't let anyone fast-talk you into being side-tracked, especially since I've heard such good things about your faith. You started well as Christians. Keep it up! Don't let anybody confuse you with meaningless religious doubletalk. Christ is the one who has the essence of God in him completely and permanently, and since we have committed ourselves to him, we have that essence in us, too—the essence of God, who can raise the dead! God has made us spiritually alive: forgetting our sins, no more impossible laws to follow, no more fear of "spirits". So don't let these nuts tell you how to live. The rituals they try to make you follow were supposed to help people recognize Christ when he came. These deadheads think they have got it together spiritually, but they are completely out of touch with the real Christ. We are like Jesus: completely safe from the 'spirits' these people talk about, so don't go along with their crazy rules. They think they look smart with all their fake humility, but they are really clueless—these kind of rules don't help at all to live good lives.

It is possible to miss Paul's meaning when he says he 'struggles' for his readers. The powers with which he wrestled were real, and they opposed him strenuously. Paul used the strength of Christ to meet these opposing powers. We think of prayer as a way of talking to God, and it is: Paul also saw it as a way to literally meet and contest with the powers of darkness.

Paul also uses words like 'orderly' and 'firm' in a way that we might not understand. In the Greek, these words were military terms which described the way a band of disciplined soldiers stood together. He saw the situation of the Colossians as being like that of an army under attack, affirms that their lines were unbroken, their discipline intact, and their faith in (reliance on) Christ as unshaken.

In this section of his letter, Paul shows two sides of living. On one side is Christ, who is the source of salvation and life. On the other side is everything else. Rules, rituals, requirements: all these are a way to try and save ourselves. The false teachers in Colossae had come up with a system that gave THEM the power to make themselves saved. Except, of course, that isn't possible. Only in Christ is salvation possible. Only through faithful life in him can our lives be made holy. All human efforts may LOOK wise or smart, but they will not work. Only in the power of the Spirit can we walk rightly and avoid fulfilling the desires of our lower nature.

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Colossians Chapter 2 – Application Questions

1. What is wrong with studying other religions and philosophies? Why can't we take the good ideas and ignore the weird ones?
2. Sometimes rituals make me feel closer to God. Paul says the rituals the Colossians were doing were a shadow of things to come. How do I tell the difference between bad rituals and good ones?
3. Paul says that the rules and regulations set up by the false teachers in Colossae 'lack(ed) any value" in controlling their moral lives. Why don't rules help us live moral lives?

9 Colossians Chapter 3-4:1 – Scripture Questions

1. Where does Paul say Christ is located? (vs. 1)
2. Where should the overall focus of our minds be? (vs. 2)
3. What should we put to death in ourselves? (vs. 5)
4. Of what must we rid ourselves? (vs. 8-9)
5. As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, how should we "clothe" ourselves? (vs. 12-14)
6. What should rule in our hearts? (vs. 15)
7. How should we teach and admonish one another? In other words, to what standards should we hold ourselves and each other? (vs. 16)
8. Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all _____.
(vs. 17)
9. Whatever you do, work at it with all your _____, as working for the _____, not for men. (vs. 23)
10. Who are we really serving? (vs. 24)

Colossians Chapter 3 – What It Meant To Them

Live like Jesus lived! This is the quick summary of this chapter. The Colossians lived in the Greco-Roman world, and the way that they organized their church and their families was under close watch by their neighbors. In order to live peaceably, the believers in Colossae had to live honorable and virtuous lives. Following Jesus had to come first, of course, and this attempt to live like Jesus brought about conflict with the current cultural norms.

In the Greek-Roman world, the man was the absolute ruler over his household. While wives, children and slaves had value, they were in a real sense property. Even adult children were expected to be obedient to the father and could be beaten. The Colossians would have been very familiar with the 'Household Code'. These instructions (and there were several variations, dating from Aristotle) were considered extremely important to maintaining an orderly society. The Roman government even passed laws to enforce family structure, since they believed that the family was a microcosm of the empire. Anything that threatened the empire—and this included changes in family structure—was considered an evil to be squashed.

Paul's take on the Household Code was subversive. Yes, he called for the wife to be submissive to her husband (familiar) but he called on the husband to love his wife (new). He told the children to obey their parents (familiar, though it was odd to include the mother), but told the fathers not to discourage the children (new). He also told slaves to be obedient (familiar) but reminded the owners that they, too, had a master (new). The familiar Code was fulfilled in a way that kept the peace with Roman expectations but, internally, was marked by love and submission between family members.

It is probably best for us to read this chapter in terms of 'living like Jesus'. Paul begins with "Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above" and this gives us the starting point we need. We should, as Jesus did, keep our minds set on heavenly things. We should live as our new selves, given life by Christ. We should live holy lives, patient and forgiving, loving and peaceable, thankful and worshipful. In this light, we can see that Paul wants all relationships—including family relationships—to be marked by love and service. Paul calls us to do everything as if it were done for Christ himself.

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Colossians Chapter 3 – Application Questions

1. What does it mean to “set your heart on things above”? Give some examples. How do we do it?
2. We are told not to concentrate on earthly things, but earthly things are in our face every minute of the day. Isn't it impractical to ask us to do this?
3. In the time that Paul wrote, the Household Codes were commonly accepted, culturally familiar ways that families were organized. We may not have written codes any more, but there are certainly expectations of family organization. What are some of these expectations? How can Christianity adapt these expectations?

12 Colossians Chapter 4 – Scripture Questions

1. To what should we be devoted? (vs. 2)
2. What did Paul want the Colossians to pray for? (vs. 3-4)
3. How should we act towards outsiders (non-believers)? (vs. 5)
4. What should our conversation be like? Why? (vs. 6)
5. Why was Paul sending the letter and news through Tychicus? (vs. 8)
6. What does Paul think of Onesimus? (vs. 9)
7. Why did Epaphras “wrestle”, or strive, on behalf of the Colossians? (vs. 12)
8. Where did one of the house churches in Laodicia meet? (vs. 15)
9. What were the Colossians supposed to do with their letter from Paul? (vs. 16)
10. How did Paul encourage Archippus? (vs. 17)

Colossians Chapter 4 – What It Meant to Them

After spending time talking about relationships in Christian households, Paul returns to advice that applies to the entire church. Most of what he says is related to the personal devotional life, but he closes the first section with an appeal for wise behavior toward non-Christians. He touches on two extremes: the hidden, private life of prayer, and the outward, busy life of the community.

Paul uses a word for 'devote yourselves' that is built on a word meaning 'to be strong'. In Paul's experience, prayer was not a dull, quiet or careless experience. To him it implied persistence and fervor, a watchful and active experience. Prayer (to Paul) was certainly never mechanical.

The verses relating to discrete behavior in public is in response to a problem that the Colossians faced. There were charges being circulated about the Christians, rumors of their misbehavior and speculation about their family relationships. Paul wanted the Colossians to be so exemplary in their lives that it would be obvious that the slander was false. Not only would these efforts give them spiritual training, it would further the acceptance of the Gospel.

Another concern of Paul was that no opportunity be wasted in speaking to outsiders about Jesus. Paul, and his readers, expected Jesus to return at any moment, so they felt real urgency about spreading the Gospel. To this end, he encouraged them to speak pleasantly but zestfully, as a way to draw people to Christ.

14 Colossians Chapter 4 – Application Questions

1. How are we supposed to “make the most of every opportunity”? Most of the people I’m around claim to be believers of one kind or another. What if they don’t want to talk about anything except the Cowboys, or their kids? I don’t want to be pushy.
2. The Colossians were believers in a new religion, a small group in a large population of mostly pagans. They were different enough that they had to be careful about the way they lived, so that there was no bad talk about them. Don’t most of us live just like our neighbors? What could we possibly do as Christians that would make people in Garland call us trouble-makers? Does Jesus want us to blend in or stand out?
3. Paul wanted the Colossians to know all his news. Honestly, I’ve got all I can do to keep up with my own life. I don’t WANT to be involved in other people’s lives any more than I already am. How much involvement is enough?