

Pauline Epistle: **COLOSSIANS**

INTRODUCTION

Sometime during the early 60s AD, Paul wrote a letter to the church at Colossae while he was imprisoned in Rome. The Colossian church was most likely founded by Epaphras, who had visited Paul and shared with him his stories of thanksgiving and concern about the church (1:7-8, 4:12-13). The book of Colossians is Paul's letter to these brothers and sisters in Christ, reminding them to live lives "rooted and built up in him" and not in other false philosophies or worldly practices (2:6-23).

Most likely, the Colossian church was made up of Gentiles—people who were not Israelites and did not grow up under the laws of the Israelite nation. They were, however, surrounded by pagan culture from the Roman empire. As new followers of Jesus who were situated between historical Judaism and current pagan practices, the Colossians ventured back and forth between practicing Jewish customs and listening to deceitful worldly philosophies. Paul combats this by emphasizing how important it is for them to continue growing in their knowledge of Jesus and to "keep thinking about the things above, not things on earth" (3:2). Paul reminds them that Jesus has made his eternal life accessible and knowable to all who might trust him. Paul also encourages them to submit their lives to Jesus' way as they let his words dwell in them richly (3:16).

For readers today, the letter to the Colossians reminds us that we cannot fully grow in the knowledge of God and continue to bear the fruit of his kingdom if we do not live our lives *in Christ*, rooted and built up *in him*. As author Grant Macaskill explains, "Sin dwells in us, compromising our agency and controlling our passions. . . . The only solution is to be indwelt by a better presence" so that whatever we do in word or deed, we can do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus (3:17)

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

We can often tell who people are or what they do based on their clothing. Medical professionals wear scrubs, athletes wear jerseys, and wedding attendants often put on formal wear. In our daily life, we change articles of clothing based on our activity. We wear lounge clothes at home when we want to experience comfort and relaxation, but we eventually change outfits when we head to work or to eat dinner at a restaurant. As we work, relax, or commute, our clothing serves as an external sign of our internal mindset.

Paul tells the Colossians to put off old habits of disobedience because they're now being clothed with the "new man that is being renewed." He challenges them to put on a new wardrobe that looks more like their new occupation as Jesus-followers—clothing such as mercy, forgiveness, and love. These external signs of Christian practices demonstrate their inward transformation of the living Christ dwelling in them.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

Chapters 1 – 2: Supremacy of Christ

Chapters 3 – 4: Submission to Christ

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

Taking center stage in the first chapter is Paul's poem highlighting the supremacy of Christ. He's the image of the invisible God, he created and is before all things, and he has reconciled all things to God through his work on the cross.

This supremacy reminds the Colossians that nothing else is needed—no false philosophy, no practice of circumcision, etc.—to be reconciled to God and to know his salvation. Because of Jesus' authority, power, and divinity, what he accomplished on the cross is all that we need to be presented blameless before God. No other works can prove our worth to God. Instead, as we grow in our understanding of Jesus and he becomes "first in all things," we will also grow in our image-bearing of him. His peace will control our hearts, his inheritance for us will become our enthusiasm, and his resurrected life will become our eternal life as well.

Paul's language displays the development of an interconnected relationship with Jesus. As we hear and receive the gospel that Jesus has brought the kingdom of God to all mankind, we begin to bear fruit and grow. As we begin

to grow, our roots deepen. As our roots deepen, we are built up and strengthened, more able to withstand the external pressures to give in to worldly ideas or practices. We progress from knowing about Christ, to moving upward toward Christ, to producing fruit in Christ. The more we understand his supremacy and vitality in our lives, the more we saturate the world around us with those same life-giving qualities.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

OBSERVATION

- Author: Paul (1:1, 4:18)
- Audience: the church at Colossae (1:2)
- What is the organization of Colossians if anything is noticeable?
 - **Letter in prose discourse**—Paul’s intention is to present an argument that will bring about change or an intended response from the Colossians.
 - **Poetry**—Paul uses poetry in 1:15-20 to highlight the nature and supremacy of Christ before urging the Colossians to reject other philosophies and practices.
 - **Metaphor**—Paul utilizes gardening imagery to portray the development of the believer (1:6, 1:10, 2:7).
 - **Contrasts**—enemies vs. reconciliation (1:21-22), mystery vs. revelation (1:26, 2:2-3), empty vs. full (2:8-10), dead vs. alive (2:12-13; 20, 3:1), taking off vs. putting on practices (3:8-17)

INTERPRETATION

- **Literary context: How do you read your passage considering the given genre:** This letter is written in prose discourse, developing an argument with the intention of swaying the audience to respond or make a change. As we read through the letter, we see Paul’s development of the argument. He moves from encouragement and thanksgiving for the Colossian believers, to reminding them of who Christ is and what he has done for them. Out of this remembrance, the Colossians are warned not to move waywardly toward worldly thinking and habits, but instead to practice living out the ways of Jesus in their own personal lives. Paul then gives examples of what this looks like for their church: unifying character traits, household codes, devotion to prayer, etc.
- **Narrative context:** If you follow the storyline of Scripture, the letter to the Colossians finds its place on the timeline when the kingdom of God is being worked out by the church, all with the intention of drawing more people to the way of Jesus. The expected practices of the Colossians will set Jesus-followers apart as people who truly love God and others, evangelizing to the nations around them with the message that God’s redemption is for all people.
- **Cultural/Historical context:** In the first century A.D., the area surrounding Colossae held a fascination with magic and mystical beliefs. Perhaps these beliefs infiltrated the Colossian church, which Paul addresses in 2:8.

APPLICATION

- In what ways can we continue to grow in our knowledge and understanding of Jesus?
- How can we inventory our lives to expose things or people that take the rightful place of Christ?
- What beliefs or practices do we cling to, and where did they come from? Assess those beliefs and practices against the backdrop of the gospel and ask God to help toss out whatever may need pruning.

PRAYER

- Paul proclaims that he has not ceased praying for the Colossians, asking God to fill them with knowledge and understanding. When is the last time you asked God to fill you with more understanding of him?
- Ask God to reveal any areas where something or someone else might take the place of the supremacy of Christ in your life.
- Consider Paul’s requests for prayer in 4:2-6 and adapt the prayer to your time with God. Ask God to help you stay devoted to prayer, trusting that he will meet with you. Ask him to open doors for the message of Jesus to go forward and to wisely make the most of opportunities with those outside the faith.

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

“What unspeakable consolations arise from this truth, for, dear brethren, if we had to render to God something by which we should be accepted, we should be always in jeopardy; but now since we are ‘accepted in the Beloved,’ we are safe beyond all hazard.”

—Charles Spurgeon

Colossians 3:17. “And whatsoever ye do,” he saith, “in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

“For if we thus do, there will be nothing polluted, nothing unclean, wherever Christ is called on. If thou eat, if thou drink, if thou marry, if thou travel, do all in the Name of God, that is, calling Him to aid thee: in everything first praying to Him, so take hold of thy business. Wouldest thou speak somewhat? Set this in front. For this cause we also place in front of our epistles the Name of the Lord. Wheresoever the Name of God is, all is auspicious. For if the names of Consuls make writings sure, much more doth the Name of Christ. Or he means this; after God say ye and do everything, do not introduce the Angels besides. Dost thou eat? Give thanks to God both before and afterwards. Dost thou sleep? Give thanks to God both before and afterwards. Launchest thou into the forum? Do the same—nothing worldly, nothing of this life. Do all in the Name of the Lord, and all shall be prospered to thee. Wheresoever the Name is placed, there all things are auspicious. If it casts out devils, if it drives away diseases, much more does it render business easy.”

—John Chrysostom

SOURCES

- bibleproject.com/explore/video/colossians/
- bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-colossians/
- blueletterbible.org/comm/spurgeon_charles/sermons/0978.cfm?a=1108001
- The Lexham Bible Dictionary (Lexham Press 2016).
- Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Baker Academic 2023).

