

COLOSSIANS

(from How To Read The Bible Book By Book by Gordon Fee)

ORIENTING DATA FOR COLOSSIANS

Content: a letter encouraging relatively new believers to continue in the truth of Christ they have received, and warning them against outside religious influences

Author: the apostle Paul, joined by his younger companion Timothy

Date: probably A.D. 60–61 (if Paul is in Rome, as is most likely)

Recipient(s): the (mostly Gentile) believers in Colosse (Colosse was the least significant of three towns noted for their medicinal spas [including Hierapolis and Laodicea] at a crucial crossroads in the Lycus River Valley, approximately 120 miles southwest of Ephesus); the letter is also to be read, as an exchange, in Laodicea (4:16)

Occasion: Epaphras, a Pauline coworker who had founded the churches in the Lycus Valley, has recently come to Paul bringing news of the church, mostly good but some less so

Emphases: the absolute supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ, the Son of God; that Christ both forgives sin and removes one from the terror of “the powers”; religious rules and regulations count for nothing, but ethical life that bears God’s own image counts for everything; Christlike living affects relationships of all kinds

OVERVIEW OF COLOSSIANS

Although Paul has never personally been to Colosse (2:1), he knows much about the believers there and considers them one of his churches—through his coworker Epaphras (1:7–8). His primary concern is that they stand firm in what they have been taught (1:23; 2:6–16; 3:1). After a glowing thanksgiving and encouraging prayer report (1:3–12), much of the first half of the letter reiterates the truth of the gospel they have received (1:13–22; 2:2–3, 6–7, 9–15). The rest of these two chapters exposes the follies of the errors to which some are being attracted (2:4, 8, 16–23). One may rightly guess, therefore, that the emphases in Paul’s recounting the gospel are also there in response to the errors.

At the heart of the errors is a desire to regulate Christian life with rules about externals—“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (2:21, which sounds very much like certain forms of present-day Christianity). Most of chapters 3–4, therefore, take up the nature of genuinely Christian behavior. “Rules” and “regulations” have an appearance of wisdom, but no real value (2:23). Christian behavior results from having died and been raised with Christ (2:20; 3:1) and now being “hidden with Christ in God” (3:3), thus expressing itself “in the image of [the] Creator” (3:10). Note especially that the imperatives that flow out of these realities (3:12–4:6) are primarily directed toward community life, not toward individual one-on-one life with God.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING COLOSSIANS

As you read Colossians, you will want to be looking for four things. First, since so much that is said in Colossians is in direct (and indirect) response to some false teaching, be on the lookout for everything Paul says about these errors. Even though this matter does not emerge in a direct way until 2:4, by the time you are finished with chapter 2 you cannot help but see how important it is. Probably, therefore, much of what is said in 1:13–23 also was written with an eye toward what was falsely being taught.

Because of its importance for understanding this letter, a lot of scholarly energy has been devoted to the false teaching, trying to match it with what is otherwise known (or guessed at) in the Greco-Roman world. But at the end of the day all we know about it is what Paul says in this letter. We can't even be sure that there were "false teachers" as such; Paul's references are invariably to "anyone," "no one," etc. (2:4, 8, 16, 18). In any case, as you read, at least be looking for the various elements found in these errors.

The most obvious element is its Jewish flavor, which includes circumcision (2:11, 13), food laws, and the observance of the Jewish religious calendar (2:16); for Paul these are simply a written code standing over against us (2:14), merely "human commands and teachings" (2:22) that Christ has done away with. This element is apparently mixed with superstitions about angelic or spiritual powers (1:16; 2:8, 15, 18, 20), which seem also to have a powerful appeal both as divine "philosophy"—elite wisdom—(2:3, 8, 20) and divine "mystery" (1:26; 2:2). These teachings also seem to be in conflict with the physical side of Christ's earthly life and redemption (1:19, 22; 2:9).

Second, you will not be able to miss Paul's primary emphasis on the absolute supremacy of Christ over all things. This begins in 1:13, as the thanksgiving gives way to the exaltation of the Son, and carries through verse 22. It then recurs at every key point in the letter. Paul argues that Christ is the key to everything they need. All that God is ever going to do in and for the world has happened in and through him (1:19; 2:2–3, 9, 13–15, 20; 3:1). Paul also emphasizes the absolute supremacy of Christ over the powers, including Christ's role in creation and redemption. Christ is the whole package, so don't let go of him. He is the true "Head" trip (1:18; 2:10, 19).

Third, you will now want to think through the situation in the church one more time. Paul has never been there, but he has heard of their genuine faith in Christ. Notice the ways he tries to encourage them (1:3–12; 2:2; etc.), but note also the warnings (1:23; 2:4; etc.). At the same time think about how some things are said precisely because they do not know Paul personally but only through Epaphras. This is especially true of 1:24–2:5, where he sets his calling and ministry before them, especially in terms of the Gentile mission and what God has done through him by the power of the Spirit.

Fourth, at the end you may wish to read the whole letter again, this time with the knowledge that Onesimus (4:9) is being returned to Philemon for forgiveness, so Paul is preparing the church to receive Onesimus back as well (see Philemon). Read it at least once as you think Onesimus might have heard it; then perhaps try to put yourself in the shoes of a member of the church in Colosse.

A WALK THROUGH COLOSSIANS

1:1–2 Salutation

This is pretty standard, but note especially the emphasis on the Colossian believers already being holy and faithful.

1:3–14 Thanksgiving and Prayer

As usual, these anticipate much that is in the letter. The thanksgiving emphasizes the Colossians' already existing faith and love; the prayer asks for the Spirit's wisdom and understanding so that they might live lives worthy of Christ, made possible by God's power. Note how at the end the prayer gives way once more to thanksgiving (v. 12), which then trails off into a sentence that gives the reason for it—redemption through God's Son so as to share in his inheritance.

1:15–23 The Supremacy of the Son of God

This marvelous passage, which has a profoundly hymnic quality to it, actually continues the sentence that began in verse 12 (and continues through verse 16). Notice how what began with the Father's redemption through his Son, now proceeds to exalt the Son, who bears his image. In turn Paul proclaims first the Son's supremacy in relationship to the whole created order, including "the powers," as the creator of all things (vv. 15–17), and then in relationship to the church as its redeemer (vv. 18–22), concluding with a concern that the Colossians stay with Christ (v. 23).

1:24–2:5 Paul's Role

As you read this section, think about how it functions in a letter to a church that Paul has not founded or visited. His present imprisonment is to be understood as carrying on the sufferings of Christ for the sake of the (especially Gentile) church (1:24–27); his present role is to "strenuously contend" (an athletic metaphor) for members of churches like theirs and Laodicea, who have not known him personally, so that they might be encouraged and not fall prey to false teaching.

2:6–23 Christ over against Religious Seductions of All Kinds

Here you come to the heart of the letter. Christ in his incarnation and crucifixion both exposes and eliminates the "hollow philosophy" some are entertaining—a philosophy that first of all has to do with "the powers" (vv. 6–10). But note how in verses 11–19, this philosophy has been tied to an attempt to bring Gentile believers in Christ under the three primary identity markers of the Jewish Diaspora (see "Specific Advice for Reading Galatians," pp. 342–43), especially food laws and the Jewish calendar (v. 16), and perhaps circumcision. Note how Paul responds: They have received a new and truly effective circumcision—in the cross Christ has forgiven sin and triumphed over "the powers" (vv. 11–15); food laws and sacred days were a "shadow" of the reality, Christ himself, whose death and resurrection has forever eliminated the need to live by rules (vv. 16–23). Observe especially how Paul concludes: Rules "have an appearance of wisdom," but "lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." Rules simply aim too low; believers are made for higher and better things.

3:1–11 The New Basis for (Christian) Behavior

Our participation in the death (2:20) and resurrection (3:1) of Christ eliminates the need to follow religious rules. Believers in Christ have died to those merely human things, having been raised to life by the one who is now exalted to the Father's right hand (see Ps 110:1). Paul then describes what we have died to (Col 3:5–9) and, by a shift of images (changing clothing), urges us to a life that reflects God's own image (v. 10). Verse 11 anticipates the imperatives that follow by reminding his readers that Christ has eliminated all cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and racial barriers.

3:12–4:6 What Christian Life Looks Like

Based on God's love and election (3:12), Paul proceeds to illustrate how God's image (in Christ) is to be lived out in their relationships with each other. Notice how everything flows out of the character traits of verse 12, two of which describe Christ in Matthew 11:29, and most of which are called "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22–23. Remember as you read that these instructions in Christian behavior are not directed toward individual piety, but toward life in the Christian community, the basic expression of which is the Christian household.

4:7–18 Final Greetings

We learn much here, so don't read too hastily. Note especially the description of Onesimus (v. 9) as a "faithful and dear brother, who is one of you" (cf. Philemon). Note also how the greetings (Col 4:10–15) function to remind the Colossian believers that they belong to a much larger community of faith, including some mutual acquaintances.

What an important part of the biblical story this letter is, by its exaltation of Christ and by reminding us that behavior counts for something—but only as it is a reflection of Christ's own character and redemption.