

## Winter Bible Study: Colossians & Philemon

### Session 1 – Colossians 1:1-14

January 13, 2021

6:30 PM

Facebook Live

#### **Background...**

Colossians and Philemon are two of the Apostle Paul's "Prison Epistles", letters that he penned while in prison in one of multiple places. The other Prison Epistles are Philippians and Ephesians. Many scholars believe that Colossians and Philemon may have been sent at the same time to the church at Colossae, since one of the individuals in the letters – Onesimus – is mentioned in both. Colossians is a letter written to a Christian church, while Philemon is a letter written to an individual Christian. The unique approach that Paul takes in both letters, considering the audience, will be evident.

#### **Authorship and Time Period...**

Paul is attributed to writing the letter to the Colossians. Some scholars believe that a student or pupil of Paul may have actually written the letter, but the themes remain Pauline in nature. There is a close relationship between the letters of Colossians and Ephesians, leading to some speculation that one letter was used for format and focus to write the other letter. Both Paul and Timothy are mentioned at the beginning of the letter to the Colossians, so some biblical scholars speculate that Timothy might have actually written the letter itself.

The letter is believed to have been written sometime between 52 and 60 AD. The eight-year difference in the time is based on the uncertainty of where Paul was in prison when the letter was written. The majority of scholars believe that Paul was in Rome when the letter was written, which would lean towards a later dating of the letter (60 AD). (This date would indicate that it was towards the end of Paul's life.) Some recent scholarship argue that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus at the time of this letter. The evidence that supports this theory is that both Epaphras and Onesimus, both mentioned in this letter (and later in Philemon), were present at the time of the writing. Epaphras was the founder of the Colossian Church, and shared with Paul some of the struggles this church was having. The belief is that Tychichus and Philemon were the two men who delivered the letter, and both were present in that region – Colossae and Ephesus being within a 100 miles of each other. If this is the case, an earlier date is needed, probably between 52 and 55 AD because of Paul's missionary travels.

## **The City of Colossae and the Colossian Church...**

The ancient city of Colossae was located in the Lycus Valley (in modern day Turkey), less than fifteen miles from the more prominent cities of Laodicea (an important imperial center for the Roman Empire) and Hierapolis (famous for its healing springs). The city was 100 miles from Ephesus. Due to Roman resettlement and its location on a major trade route, Colossae consisted of a diverse population, including a large Jewish community. Many of these Jewish followers fled to this area after being forced out of Jerusalem by Antiochus III and IV around 200 BC. The Colossian community was heavily influenced by the strong hierarchical character of Roman society, particularly the household unit structured under the *paterfamilias* (“father of the family”). The “father” had both economic and moral authority over the household – women, slaves, children – even after they grew to adulthood. Paul’s words in this letter will address the tension between this hierarchy and being a follower of Jesus. History tells us that a large earthquake destroyed the city of Colossae between 60 and 64 AD, and it appears that the city was not rebuilt for some time.

Epaphras, one of Paul’s Christian converts, had founded the Christian church at Colossae. Paul never visited the church at Colossae, but heard of some of their struggles from Epaphras. Paul could be seen as a “mother”/teacher for this Christian community, even though he had not met the followers in person. The writing of this letter was to address and refute heretical teachings about Christ that had been causing confusion among the Christian followers. Many believe this letter was intended to be circulated among the numerous Christian communities gathered in that area.

**Paul’s personal circumstances, imprisoned in a Roman jail, make the content of this letter poignant, showing a picture of a man facing difficulties and hardships, coming through with his faith and hope standing strong. However, his words to this early church – facing hardships and struggles with their beliefs and practice – can serve as a voice of reason for the modern church and individual Christians today.**

### *Opening Question:*

*Think of a time when you saw someone’s life radically change for the better. How did you react to this change? What did you think and say about that person? To that person?*

## **Colossians 1:1-14**

### *Colossians 1:1-2 – The Opening of the Letter*

Paul starts the letter to the Colossians as he does many of his letters, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ”. The term “apostle” means “chosen” – a label often used by Paul since he was not one of the original twelve disciples. The addition of the description “by the will of God” by Paul shows that God – adding extra emphasis to a Christian church that Paul never visited in person - appointed him. He was sharing from the beginning, that although he did not found the church, he still had authority since one of his pupils founded the church.

Paul mentions Timothy as a “sender” of the letter as well. This sharing of a second name was not usual unless the individual assisted in the writing/dictating. Timothy is mentioned more frequently in the Pauline letters than any of Paul’s other students (2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon).

Paul also uses the terminology, “Jesus Christ”, showing the Colossae community’s faith and understanding of who Jesus was. In verse 2, he follows this up with the “saints and faithful brethren in Christ”. This “saint” terminology may reveal the Jewish distinctiveness in the community, especially the messianic Jewish community in Colossae. The “faithful brethren” may reference the Gentiles believers in the church. This welcome was all-inclusive. Paul was issuing his standard greeting, “Grace and peace” to everyone.

### *Colossians 1:3-5a – Giving Thanks for their Faith*

Paul immediately follows the greeting with an expression of “thanksgiving” – revealing the writer’s goodwill towards the church. Notice, however, that the “thanksgiving” is directed to God, not the church itself. Paul recognized that all good comes from God, and that they were one together in lifting praise to Him. He shares that he has “heard” of the Colossian church’s faith. Remember, Paul had never been to or knew personally the church members in Colossae. The only one we are aware of is Epaphras, his student.

Paul mentions the traditional triad of Christian virtues – faith, love, and hope – in these opening verses. The mention of faith is in reference to their personal beliefs. The mention of love which you have “for all the saints” seems to indicate the church’s willingness to reach out and show concern for other Christians, whether in their community or outside their border. The mention of hope reveals their ultimate source of hope, which is found in Jesus Christ.

Paul's ultimate hope is that these Christians will continue to grow in faith. This hope means the church should keep their eyes on the horizon, knowing where true hope comes from.

### *Colossians 1:5b-8 – Elaboration of Thanksgiving*

The next clause used in verse five – “of which you have previously heard in the word of truth - should not be removed from the previous clause on hope. Paul is also setting up the Colossian church for addressing the issues that Epaphras has shared with him. The source of this understanding, the knowledge gained, comes from the “word of truth” – the gospel. Epaphras had come to Paul to combat an underlying issue – understanding of “truth” and “knowledge” – that was directing some of the church members off the path of the gospel. In sharing faith, hope, and love, Paul intentionally leaves out a fourth virtue that is commonly attached – “knowledge”. This was the source of controversy within the church (possibly a mystical Gnosticism heresy).

The virtues that Paul is praising the Colossian church for having is resulting in “fruit” being shared with the world (Galatians 5 – “Fruits of the Spirit). Paul is sharing that this fruit is evident and growing, and has been growing since they first received this faith, hope, and love. The believers’ lives have been changed, never to look the same. God’s effect on our lives is transforming! The gospel is a living thing that grows. The numbers in Colossae have been growing since its inception.

Paul then alludes to the church’s founder, his pupil, Epaphras. Most scholars believe he founded this church while Paul was in Ephesus. He may have been converted in Ephesus, and then returned home to Colossae to spread the good news. Epaphras had shared to the church his love and devotion to Paul as a teacher, and they in turn have shown their “love in the Spirit” for Paul – even though they had never met. If the Colossian church was founded in the early 50’s when Paul was at Ephesus, one could consider that they were not “new” believers. However, Paul had to be careful in what and how he shared things in this letter – especially the controversy taking place within the church – since he had never been there.

### *Colossians 1:9-12 – Prayer of Intercession*

Paul now approaches the topic and reason for the letter. He shares with the congregation that he is “praying” for them since the day “he heard it”. This intercessory prayer is based on the information that Epaphras had passed on to Paul. Notice Paul’s desire for the church to be filled with the “knowledge of His will” – God’s will. The heresy plaguing the church at that time was similar to *Gnosticism*, a mystical subset of many religions that valued the accumulation of special “gnosis”, or knowledge, which placed an individual in a higher standing. This “knowledge” was not available to all, only a select few. Paul’s desire for the church was two-fold – (1) that they be filled with the knowledge of God, and (2) that they would be good fruit because of this knowledge. Knowledge, all in itself, is empty. However, knowledge gained from God is for everyone, and should lead into the practice of helping others.

The only way that the Colossian church will make an impact in their community and the world (the Roman Empire) is through the power of the Holy Spirit. Only through Him can the believers be steadfast in their faith, patient with the world in which they live, and difference makers in their community. Paul was probably combatting this alternate view with the words that he was sharing.

Paul was making sure that the church understood there was a “not yet” dimension to their faith. Similar to the Old Testament tribes receiving their portion of land when they entered the Promised Land, Paul was reminding these believers that there is a future promise of an inheritance of the “saints in Light”. Whatever false teaching was taking place, this teaching would not – could not – provide the inheritance that is found through faith, love, hope, and knowledge found in Jesus Christ.

### *Colossians 1:13-14 – Transition to the Praise of Christ*

Paul lists five benefits that God gives all believers, not just those in Colossae, through Christ. (1) He makes us qualified to share his inheritance. (2) He rescued us from Satan’s dominion of darkness, making us His children. (3) He brought us into the eternal kingdom. (4) He has redeemed us, buying our freedom from sin and judgement. (5) He forgave us for all our sins.

The Colossian church feared the “unseen” – forces of darkness. This may have been the reason they were venturing off the path towards this “gnostic” thought process. Paul is reminding them that Christ is the one who has brought

them into the “light”. The conduct of the church and the individual Christians should reflect this true allegiance to Christ. (This goes for the church today!) There are few allusions to in the New Testament to a messianic kingdom as distinguished from God’s kingdom, but this seems to be one. The reign of Christ is evident in the lives of believers. What is the reward? Redemption – the forgiveness of sins.

### **Follow Up Questions...**

- 1. What qualities does Paul see in the lives of the Colossian Christians that indicates the gospel is growing? What about in our church – in our lives – today?*
- 2. Why is understanding God’s will important for spiritual growth?*
- 3. The climax of Paul’s intercessory prayer for the Colossians is that they will learn the act of “thanksgiving” – showing gratitude to God for the extraordinary things He has done in Jesus and that He continues to do in the world. When, why, and how do you most frequently thank God?*

### **Next Week...**

**Winter Bible Study: Colossians and Philemon**

**Session 2 – Colossians 1:15-29**

**Wednesday, January 20**

**6:30 PM on Facebook Live**