

## **Book of Colossians**

### **Title:**

Colossians is named for the city of Colossae, where the church it was addressed to was located. It was also to be read in the neighboring church at Laodicea (4:16).

### **Authorship - Date:**

This letter was written by Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ (1:1; compare verse 23; 4:18).

Though he did not personally know all of the recipients, we know Paul was acquainted with them through Epaphras.

Epaphras probably planted the church in Colossae, judging from the fact that the believers there first learned the gospel from him (1:7).

Afterwards he served as their minister and informed the apostle of their conversion (1:7-8).

The testimony of the early church, including such key figures as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius, confirms that the opening claim is genuine.

Additional evidence for Paul's authorship comes from the book's close parallels with Philemon, which is universally accepted as having been written by Paul.

Both were written (ca. A.D. 60-62), when Paul was a prisoner in Rome (4:3, 10, 18; Philemon 9, 10, 13, 23); plus the names of the same people (e.g., Timothy, Aristarchus, Archippus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, Onesimus, and Demas), appear in both epistles, showing that both were written by the same author at about the same time.

For biographical information on Paul, see Introduction to Romans: Author and Date.

Colossians was likely penned, as were Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon, during Paul's first imprisonment at Rome (1:24; 4:18).

The numerous parallels of vocabulary and matters discussed in Ephesians and Colossians link these epistles together.

Also, there are many personal references common to Philemon and Colossians.

### **Destination:**

The letter is addressed to the church at Colossae (1:2), a town in Asia Minor about one hundred miles east of Ephesus and 12 miles south of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Colossae had once been a thriving trade center, but its commercial influence was waning in Paul's day.

From (Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7), it seems that Tychicus delivered both of these epistles to their respective destinations.

### **Background – Setting:**

Colossae was a city in Phrygia, in the Roman province of Asia (part of modern Turkey), about 100 miles east of Ephesus in the region of the 7 churches of Rev. chapters 1-3).

The city lay alongside the Lycus River, not far from where it flowed into the Maender River.

The Lycus Valley narrowed at Colossae to a width of about two miles, and Mt. Cadmus rose 8,000 feet about the city.

Colossae was a thriving city in the fifth century B.C., when the Persian king Xerxes (Ahasuerus, compare Esther 1:1), marched through the region.

Black wool and dyes (made from the nearby chalk deposits), were important products.

In addition, we see that the city was situated at the junction of the main north-south and east-west trade routes.

By Paul's day, however, the main road had been rerouted through nearby Laodicea, thus by passing Colossae and leading to its decline and the rise of the two neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Although Colossae's population was mainly Gentile, there was a large Jewish settlement dating from the days of Antiochus the Great (223 – 187 B.C.).

Colossae's mixed population of Jews and Gentiles manifested itself both in the composition of the church and in the heresy that plagued it, which contained elements of both Jewish legalism and pagan mysticism.

The church at Colossae began during Paul's 3 year ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19).

Its founder was not Paul, who had never been there (2:1); but Epaphras (1:5-7), who apparently was saved during a visit to Ephesus, then he likely started the church in Colossae when he returned home.

Several years after the Colossian church was founded, a dangerous heresy arose to threaten it, one not identified with any particular historical system.

It contained elements of what later became known as Gnosticism: that God is good, but matter is evil, that Jesus Christ was merely one of a series of emanations descending from God and being less than God (a belief that led them to deny His true humanity), and that a secret, higher knowledge about Scripture was necessary for enlightenment and salvation.

The Colossian heresy also embraced aspects of Jewish legalism, e.g., the necessity of circumcision for salvation, observance of the ceremonial rituals of the Old Testament law (dietary laws, festivals, Sabbaths), and rigid asceticism.

It also called for the worship of angels and mystical experience.

Epaphras was so concerned about this heresy that he made the long journey from Colossae to Rome (4:12-13), where Paul was a prisoner.

This letter was written from prison in Rome (Acts 28:16-31), sometime between A.D. 60-62 and is, therefore, referred to as a Prison Epistle (along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon).

It may have been composed almost contemporaneously with Ephesians and initially sent with that epistle and Philemon by Tychicus (Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8).

See Introduction to Philippians: Author and Date for a discussion of the city from which Paul wrote this letter to warn the Colossians against the heresy they faced, and sent the letter to them with Tychicus, who was accompanying the runaway slave Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, a member to the Colossian church (4:7-9; see Introduction to Philemon: Background and Setting).

Epaphras remained behind in Rome (compare Philemon 23), perhaps to receive further instruction from Paul.

### **Historical – Theological Themes:**

Colossians contains teaching on several key areas of theology, including the deity of Christ (1:15-20; 2-10), reconciliation (1:20-23), redemption (1:13-14, 2:13-14, 3:9-11), election (3:12), forgiveness (3:13), and the nature of the church (1:18; 24-25; 2:19; 3:11, 15).

Also, as noted above, it refutes the heretical teaching that threatened the Colossian church (chapter 2).

Epaphras either visited Paul in Rome or was imprisoned there with him (Philemon 23).

In either case, he informed Paul of the dangerous theological error circulating in the churches of Colossae and Laodicea.

In response to Epaphras' plea for help, Paul writes this epistle to the Colossians, which is also to be read in the church at Laodicea (4:16), in an attempt to check the heresy's influence.

The Colossian Christians had been led to Christ by Epaphras (1:7).

The majority were Gentiles (2:13) who were progressing in their new faith.

Paul rejoiced over their good spiritual condition (2:5), but the Colossian church was being exposed to a local heresy that threatened to deprive them of their spiritual blessings (2:8, 18).

The heresy was syncretistic, that is, it was composed of elements drawn from paganism, Judaism and Christianity.

The pagan element espoused a false philosophy (see 2:8), that appears to have been an early form of Gnosticism.

This movement viewed matter as evil, denied the divine creation of the universe, held to many angelic beings or spiritual intermediaries existing between God and men, advocated the worship of these angelic beings (2:18), and stressed secret "knowledge" (received when initiated into their cult), as the means of attaining salvation.

The Jewish element was legalistic in nature, retained the Mosaic Law (2:14), imposed circumcision (2:11), followed dietary restrictions and calendar observations (2:16), and advocated asceticism (2:21-23).

The heresy's Christian component did not deny Christ, but dethroned Him.

He was not regarded as divine or as Creator of the universe, and His death was thus deprived of any saving merit.

The letter's aim was to refute the Colossian heresy, to demonstrate the preeminence of Christ, and to confirm the addressees in the Christian faith.

The supremacy and adequacy of Christ is stressed throughout.

He is presented as fully God (2:9), as Creator (1:16), as preeminent over the universe and church (1:17-18), and as Savior (1:20-21).

Because Christ is over all, the Colossians are "complete in Him" (2:10), that is, He is more than adequate in that He alone, rather than any angelic being, can meet all their spiritual needs.

The Colossians, then, should worship God the Father through Him alone and depend on Him only for salvation, refusing to rely on vain philosophy, secret knowledge, or legalism in an attempt to secure divine favor.

In one form or another, approximately 75 of the 105 verses in Colossians can be found in Ephesians: Colossians mentions that the church is the body of Christ (1:18); this doctrine is then further developed in the sister epistle of Ephesians.

Colossians stresses Jesus as Head, which Ephesians emphasizes the church as His body.