

Epistles of Paul
Number 75
Introduction to Colossians

We begin our study of Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. Today we will discuss the geography of the area, the city, surrounding cities, and a little about the heresies Paul was writing to them about. One problem with Paul's letter to the Colossians.....Unlike Paul's other letters, which have references to other letters, pretty much all the information you get about Colossians is from the letter itself.



The geographical area included Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae. These towns lay in Asia Minor, and are found about 100 miles east of that of Ephesus. As you will see, the tri-city area was very prosperous.



In this cutout, you can see the Lycus ("wolf") River in the Southeast flows westward through the Lycus River Valley. Colossae stood close to the stream, in fact the waters ran through the town. Laodicea and Hierapolis stood further back, each on a hill side, Hierapolis sat on the steep side of a mountain range.

Here is an interesting fact.....Colosse was very close to the seven churches of Revelation.



The whole region has been frequented with volcanoes and earthquakes for thousands of years. Laodicea was shaken four times between B. C. 125 and A. D. 235, the third shock falling probably in A. D. 65, a few years after the writing of the Colossian epistle, struck all three towns. It is thought that members of the church at Colossae were killed in the earthquake. Since Paul wrote his letter to an existing church, the earthquake must have been after he wrote his letter. If not, you would think that Paul would have written about, and probably asked for aid for the cities.

The river Lycus was important to the area for an odd reason. The waters of the River and its tributaries were impregnated with chalk. Chalk would accumulate and create the most amazing formations. The chalk, however, was deadly to vegetation.

With earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and a river of chalk, why would the area be wealthy.

I'm glad you asked.....Think of Hawaii. It was formed thru earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The soil from volcanic pumas becomes very fertile over millennia. Such was the case in the Lycus River Valley. The pastures of the valley are rich, especially on the side of Colossae and Laodicea, and the breed of sheep was excellent; their wool was naturally dyed a glossy black by the mineral in the waters. The artificial dyes of Colossae, and Laodicea were famous, as were those of their provincial neighbor Thyatira. Of the three towns of the region of the Lycus Valley, the most important was Laodicea. Its name dates from about B. C. 250. John tells us that Laodicea was rich and in need of nothing. His words were literal as well as metaphorical.

But what about the chalky river that killed vegetation? The water in the river had a quality which made it suitable for dyeing cloth and wool. The dye came from a

flower grown in the region. Remember Lydia, from Thyatira, a seller of purple? Colossae was so famous for its purple dye from the cyclamen flower, it had a dye named after it. It was called Colossinus. I wonder if the people of the area sneezed and had trouble breathing. 😊

One thing you need to keep in mind as we discuss this introduction to the letter.....unlike other letters and books, Colossae isn't discussed elsewhere in the scriptures. Many of Paul's letters refer to Acts or to other letters written by him and others. This is not the case with Colossians. With this letter, we only have the letter itself, and historical documents. As you know, we can't depend on historical documents as much as we can the scriptures. I have tried to verify everything in this study, but can't guarantee everything is one hundred percent accurate.

One other thing worth mentioning.....there is a missing letter, presumably written by Paul.

Colossians 4:16 (KJV) ¹⁶ And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the *epistle* from Laodicea.

The next map shows that Paul traveled very close to Colossae. However, the letter implies that he never went there. We will see that as we continue our study.



The Epistle to the Colossians is one of the four Prison Epistles.....Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These letters were written around 62 AD. They were written by the apostle Paul, most likely while he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial before Emperor Nero. I say "most likely," because there is some debate that he wrote the letters while he was a prisoner in Cencrea.

Acts 25:4-6 (KJV) ⁴ But Festus answered, that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself would depart shortly *thither*.

Most scholars, however, agree the letters were written from Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

Epaphras was a main character in Paul's letter to the Colossians. He mentions Epaphras as one who brought the Good News to the Colossians.

Colossians 1:7 (KJV) ⁷ As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ;

Epaphras was probably converted during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus. Ephesus was the commercial and governmental center for the whole province, which included Colosse. In Acts, Luke tells us that during Paul's time in Ephesus, "people throughout the province Asia... heard the word of the Lord."

Acts 19:1 (KJV) ¹ And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,
¹⁰ And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

Because of the news he brought, Paul wrote Colossians when Epaphras was visiting him in prison. He also wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon while in prison. We will get to the other epistles later.

Colossians 4:12 (KJV) ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

¹³ For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them *that are* in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis.

Epaphras most likely was converted during the three years Paul ministered in Ephesus, and was trained in Paul's school.

Acts 19:8-9 (KJV) ⁸ And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.
⁹ But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus.

It is understood that he then returned to his home town of Colossae, and started a church.

Why did Paul write the letter to the Colossians?

The Epistle to the Colossians is written to combat an unspecified but insidious error that crept into the church at Colosse some six years after its founding. Epaphras visits Paul during his imprisonment in Rome and brings with him the alarming news that certain false doctrines and practices threaten the faith of the Colossian Christians. As a result, Paul and Epaphras fear the Colossians are in danger of drifting from the gospel.

Thus Paul writes to combat certain false teachings about Christ and to give encouragement for the **Christian** life.

Colossians 2:8 (KJV) ⁸ Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

The heresy taking root in Colosse was a form of gnosticism, which taught (among other things) that humans could transcend evil and the corruptions of the world through their own strength of will.

Colossians seems to have been written primarily to correct a heresy that seemed to be developing in the church at Colosse and possibly spreading to other churches. False teachers were at work in the church at Colosse. Their teachings removed Jesus from His central place in revelation and salvation. They also perverted the gospel teaching about how people could be redeemed. They regarded their teaching as a philosophy, but Paul called it "human tradition" and an empty deceit.

There are various versions of Gnosticism. This was an early version. The biggest danger of Gnosticism is that it relegates Jesus Christ to a lower status from God.....if they even believe in God. According to Gnosticism, Jesus Christ was not the creator. He was not even human. He just SEEMED to be human. See if you can wrap your hands around THAT thought.

Here is a definition of Gnosticism. If you can make sense of it, please explain it to me.

Gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created and ruled by a lesser divinity, the demiurge, and that Christ was an emissary of the remote supreme divine being, esoteric knowledge (gnosis) of whom enabled the redemption of the human spirit.

One note of interest. Are you aware that we use the word Gnostic, occasionally?

Gnostic means knowledge. Therefore, Agnostic means lack of knowledge.

Evidence suggests that though Paul himself had not visited Colosse. Timothy and Epaphras had evangelized the city and founded the church during Paul's three-year stay in Ephesus while on his third missionary journey.

Colossians 2:1 (KJV) ¹ For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh;

Remember, in all the letters written in the Greek scriptures, we only see one side. Paul did not actually describe their views; he assumed the readers knew them. Rather, he responded to the false teachers. We can only infer their views by studying his answers.

Many varieties of evolutionary philosophy thrived in the Greco/Roman world of the day (Epicureanism, Stoicism, Gnosticism, etc.), but the essential basis of all of them was denial of the Creator God of the universe.

We see Paul disputing this in chapter 1:16-20.

Colossians 1:16-20 (KJV) ¹⁶ For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether *they be* thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

¹⁷ And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all *things* he might have the preeminence.

¹⁹ For it pleased *the Father* that in him should all fulness dwell;

²⁰ And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, *I say*, whether *they be* things in earth, or things in heaven.

Paul sets forth Jesus Christ as Creator, Sustainer and Reconciler of all things in heaven and earth. He then went on to insist that all wisdom and knowledge were centered in Christ and to warn against all human philosophy.

I got the following from one of the commentaries I read. Don't ask me which one. I read a bunch.

As Supreme Being--False teachers were belittling the all-sufficiency of Christ and removing Him from the supreme and central place in Christian faith.

As Redeemer—we can infer that the false teachers did not see Jesus' death as fully sufficient to deliver people.

As Creator—Evidently the false Colossian teachers saw Christ as only one among a number of divine beings involved in the creation. They said Christ was not the only one who exercised rule over the creation.

As Revealer—The false teachers did not see Jesus as the only Revealer of God. They were claiming secret revelations and visions, some of which came from the other spiritual powers.

To the equality and unity of believers. The error at Colosse created a sense of elitism. Some saw themselves as superior because of secret knowledge gained from the powers and because of unique spiritual experiences.

Like many of you, I've seen this "elitism" in action. Some people believe they have been specially called of God to propagate their own private message. Here is an example that I'm sure some of you have witnessed over the years.

In 1979, I attended my first Feast with the Church of God, International. It was a great Feast. We spent the week getting to know one another. I still have good friends that I met there. However, that Feast was the harbinger of major problems down the road. While most of us gathered in small groups getting to know one another, several people gathered people around them to gather a following of them, with their great new truth. I can't help but think of that Feast when I study the letter Paul wrote to the Colossians.

There are some good warnings and things we should take note of in Paul's letter to the Colossians. It is a message probably more urgently needed in our day than even in Paul's day.

Consider these questions as you read Colossians today:

- 1. How do you keep an eye out for heretical teachings?*
- 2. Have you ever tried, perhaps unwittingly, to "complicate" the message of salvation? How so—and what helped you recognize your efforts for what they were?*
- 3. Why do you think it was so easy for churches to fall prey to false teachings in Paul's day? Do you think it's still a problem in today's church?*
- 4. Imagine that this letter was written to you. How would you respond?*