

Colossians

Purpose: “To defend the complete adequacy of Christ as contrasted with the emptiness of mere human philosophy” (edited from NIV Study Bible).

Outline: 1:1-14 – Thanksgiving and Prayer

1:15-23 – The Supremacy of Christ

1:24-2:7 – The purpose of Paul’s Ministry and his Interest in the Colossians

2:8-23 – The Sufficiency of Christ

3:1-4:1 – Holy Life in Christ

Author: Paul

Date: 60-62 AD while imprisoned in Rome

Highlights:

This letter to Colossians, along with letters to churches in Ephesus and Philippi – and the personal letter to Philemon – are referred to as the “Prison Epistles” (or “Prison Letters”) because they were written by Paul while under house arrest in Rome.

It is important to note that Paul is never recorded as having visited Colosse. It was, by far, the least significant city to which any of Paul’s surviving letters were addressed. The church was founded by a Colossian named Epaphras (1:7-8; cf. Acts 19:10), apparently in the wake of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus during his third missionary journey. In Colossians 4:12-13 we read that Epaphras was with Paul during part of his Roman imprisonment.

The purpose of Paul’s letters can be inferred from statements he makes in opposition to false teachings, which had come into the church. The Colossian heresy seems to be a mixture of an extreme form of Judaism (holding to strict rules about ritual law) and an early stage of Gnosticism (holding that body, which is matter, is evil and that salvation comes through a secret “knowledge”). Paul speaks boldly about the Christian’s freedom from the law and against human knowledge and wisdom.

Paul begins with a thanksgiving and prayer for the Colossians. Note the triad of the great Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love in 1:5.

The middle section of chapter one (1:15-23) simply praises the supremacy of Christ. In the rest of the first chapter, along with the beginning of the second chapter, Paul reveals the purpose of his ministry and his interest in the Colossians. For the sake of the church, Paul has endured many afflictions; but it is worth it to him so that all may know Christ, and understand the truth of God apart from the lies of the world.

The sufficiency of Christ is expounded in 2:8-23. Because of Christ we are free from human laws and regulations (cf. Galatians 5:22-23). Therefore, we ought not to be taken captive by human philosophy, but taken captive by Christ. Neither should we become legalistic, but be filled with Christ.

Chapter 3 transitions from talking about our freedom from the law to talking about the way a Christian ought to live. This can seem contradictory on the surface; but as you explore the truth of Christian freedom and the truth of Christian living in the context of the whole of Scripture it is all quite clear. Jesus says, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). What this means is that you cannot be righteous enough to enter heaven, but need the imputed righteousness of Christ. And when Christ is imputed into your heart, soul, and mind you will find that your whole life is transformed to becoming conformed to the holiness of God. We must be made holy – not through obedience to the law – but through a life in Christ.

Chapter 4 contains Paul’s final instructions and greetings. One of the great verses comes from here, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (4:6).