

Colossians: An overview

COLOSSAE THE CITY

- Colossae was situated some 110 miles east of Ephesus
- It had been a town of considerable significance and wealth, on an important trade route; but its importance was on the wane by the time Paul wrote his letter, not least due to a serious earthquake in around AD 61.
- As a result, the trade route had shifted north to nearby Laodicea, which was becoming richer as a result (Revelation 3:17)

THE CHURCH IN COLOSSAE

- as far as is known, Paul did not visit Colossae; nor did he found the church there – this was the work of Epaphras (1:7), who may have heard the gospel and come to faith in Jesus during Paul's 2-year missionary stay at Ephesus (Acts 19 ff)

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

- Colossians is one of four 'Prison Epistles,' letters written while Paul was in prison (4:10,18) – almost certainly during his house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16,20), around AD 60-62 – the others are Ephesians (very close in style and thought to Colossians), Philippians & Philemon
- References to Epaphras as one of Paul's mission partners (4:12,13) and 'fellow-prisoner' (Philemon 23), suggest he was in prison in Rome with Paul when he wrote this letter

POINTS OF INTEREST

- New Testament church life centred upon what we know as small communities (4:15)
- Paul's letters were intended to be read in more than one place, and were obviously swapped around the churches (4:15, 16)
- not all Paul's letters survive; we don't have the letter to the Laodiceans that Paul mentions (4:16)
- note the team work evident in Paul's ministry – the Church then, as now, depended on individuals with servant hearts and a desire to see the Kingdom come; 11 are mentioned by name in 4:7-17 alone
- it is here we learn that Luke (who wrote the gospel bearing his name, and Acts) was a doctor (4:14)
- Jesus was a popular name in the first century; Christians often adopted another name out of reverence for him (e.g. Justus, 4:11)

THE PHILEMON CONNECTION

- Philemon is a sister letter: as well as Epaphras and Onesimus, an Archippus is mentioned in both letters (Colossians 4:17 & Philemon 1:2)
- Philemon was probably one of the Colossian church leaders
- Paul has somehow met his runaway slave, Onesimus, and led him to faith
- Paul urges Philemon to welcome Onesimus home 'no longer as a slave, but ... as a dear brother' (Philemon 16)
- that Paul can speak of Onesimus, the runaway slave, as 'one of you' (4:9) gives us a glimpse of the extraordinary social transformation which was beginning to happen as a result of the gospel: this was revolutionary thinking in the Roman Empire ...

WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM IN THE COLOSSIAN CHURCH?

Essentially, the problem was one of 'syncretism' (where people combine all sorts of philosophical and religious ideas in a mish-mash of confused beliefs). In Colossae, the mix had 3 main elements -

- a legalistic element (a Jewish emphasis on ritual, food laws, special days etc. 2:16-23); this was prevalent in many parts of the infant church (Galatians and Hebrews also address this problem)
- a pagan element (angel worship; denial of the body; secret 'knowledge' 2:8,18)
- a 'Christian' element (the Colossian Christians certainly did not deny Jesus, but were in danger of dethroning him. They gave him a place, but not **the supreme** place)

THE MAJOR THEME OF COLOSSIANS

Not surprisingly, given this weak view of Jesus, Paul's major theme is the absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ. This letter is Paul's 'full-length portrait of Christ', in which he 'paints' Jesus as

- God's Son (1:14)
- the object of the Christian's faith (1:4)
- the Redeemer (1:14)
- the image of God (1:15)
- the ruler of the cosmos (1:15)
- the head of the Church (1:18)
- the reconciler of the universe (1:20)

and claims that

- in him dwells the fullness of the Godhead (2:9) and under him every power and authority in the universe is subjected (2:10)
- he is the essence of the mystery of God, in whom all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge lie hidden (2:3)
- he is the standard by which all religious teaching is to be measured (2:8) and the reality of the truth foreshadowed by the regulations and rituals of the old covenant (2:17)
- by his cross he conquered the cosmic powers of evil (2:15) and following his resurrection he was enthroned at the right hand of God (3:1)
- the Christian's life now lies hidden with God in Christ, but one day both Christ and his followers will be gloriously displayed (3:3,4)

Note how God is identified specifically as 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:3) – the significance of this is hard to overstate. As a devout Jew, and rising star within Pharisaism, Paul had been willing to kill those who were proclaiming Jesus as God.

Yet here and elsewhere in his letters, he now defines YHWH by reference to Jesus. In other words, for Paul, if you want to know God, look to Jesus (see 2:9 and compare with Jesus' own words, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.' Jn 14:9)

For St Paul, Jesus is perfect theology.