

First Christian Church of Napa – Colossians

Introducing Colossians

"More! More!" urged our daughter when I laid down the spoon after feeding her.

"Again! Again!" pleaded our daughter Gabby as I turned the last page in the book I was reading to her.

Their cries for more pudding or stories are echoed in our culture's search for more—more power, more money, more knowledge, more gadgets, more furniture, more clothes—more everything!

Books on self-improvement and success flood the market. Gurus gain eager followers by offering enlightenment, power and secret wisdom. Millions read horoscopes every day.

Not only in our society but also in the church, we cry for "more." If only we had more wisdom, more maturity, more power, more faith. To fill these needs we attend seminars, go to concerts, hear celebrity speakers and read their latest books.

Colossians was written to Christians with similar longings. They didn't know who and what they already had. False teachers urged them to add rules, ascetic practices and new philosophies to their Christian faith. Then they would have fullness of life. Paul writes to satisfy their desire for more by showing that they already had fullness in Christ.

Paul never traveled to Colossae, a city in the Lycus River valley, about a hundred miles east of Ephesus and twelve miles from Laodicea. But somehow he met Epaphras, the man who had taken the gospel to Colossae, and Philemon, the host for the local house church. While in prison in Rome, Paul learned from Epaphras about the Colossian church and the pressures threatening their peace and stability.

These "faithful brothers" had not turned away from faith in Christ. Paul's warm, friendly letter affirms their positive qualities and the changes in their lives. But he warns them against being deceived by "fine-sounding arguments" (Col. 2:4) or being captured by "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and on the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8).

The temptation to add ascetic practices, regulations or "superior knowledge" threatened their dependence on Christ alone for the fullness of life they wanted. The early Gnostics boasted about a spiritual "fullness" not previously experienced. They promised to complete and perfect the simple and elementary faith introduced by Paul and Epaphras. They emphasized a deeper knowledge of God, reserved for a special few, and an experience of greater power.

Colossians is Paul's strongest declaration of the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ, his full authority over all powers and the fullness of life he gives. Paul spells out the implications of this fullness of life again and again in the letter.

Like the Colossians, we are bombarded by longings for something more. But Paul thunders in Colossians, You already have fullness in Christ. Enjoy it! "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ" (Col. 2:9-10).

The purpose of this guide is to help you discover the scope, reality and implications of the fullness of life you have in Christ. The first study gives you an overview of the tone and contents of the letter. The next eight studies help you explore and apply the main ideas of each section. Study ten examines Paul's letter to Philemon, which gives principles for mending broken relationships.

Getting Started

Colossians 1-4

How exciting to get a celebrity's autograph! We love to retell the circumstances when we spotted him, how we approached him, what he said and how we felt as we floated away with the prize in hand.

To the Colossians, Paul was somewhat of a celebrity. Yet instead of getting his autograph, they received an entire letter from him. In this study we'll read the letter they received. We'll get acquainted with these impressive Christians and the issues that prompted Paul's letter. By reading the entire letter, we'll see those issues in context.

1. Imagine yourself as one of those new Christians crowded into a home to listen to this unexpected letter from Paul. What emotions would you feel while you're waiting for the others to arrive?

2. Read Col. 1-4. What impresses you about these Colossian Christians?

3. What had Paul learned about them (Col. 1:3-8)?

4. What words would you use to describe the emotional tone of the letter?

5. What dangers does Paul warn against (Col. 2:8-3:11)?

If he were writing today, which dangers might he still include?

6. Into what main sections would you divide the letter?

What brief title would you give each section?

7. Paul's theme statement is found in Col. 2:9-10. What examples of this theme do you find in each section of the book?

8. When you read through the letter, which parts were the most interesting to you, and why?

Which were the most confusing?

9. What characteristics of the Colossians do you see developing in your life or in your church?

Background Colossians

Although Paul wrote to the church at Colossae from house arrest in Rome, the power of Christ was not chained. Throughout his refutation of heresy, Paul points out that Christ is the image of God, the sustainer, the source. Even if some new, attractive teaching seems substantial, it is hollow and deceptive next to the fullness of Christ. By demonstrating the supremacy of Christ, Paul hopes to refocus the attention of the Colossians "on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1).

Mixing Greek and oriental ideas and practices was so popular in the first century that we have a word for it: syncretism. Everybody wanted to mix his or her own blend of Greek, Roman, Persian, Egyptian, and other doctrines to suit personal taste. Judaism had already absorbed many Greek ideas, and when Gentiles embraced Christianity, they naturally wanted to mix their former beliefs and customs with their new faith.

By the time the Colossian church was established, a pattern was beginning to emerge among the religious recipes being mixed throughout the Empire. We call this semi-standard recipe "Gnosticism," although it was not standardized enough to be called that until the second century AD.

The Gnostics borrowed from at least four areas of tradition: the philosophy of Plato, oriental religion, Judaism, and Christianity. It was perhaps the "borrowing" from Christianity that was most disturbing to Paul, as those who brought such teaching were not just looking for listeners, but for converts. Among the teachings of the Gnostics were:

1. The material world is essentially evil or, at best, indifferent. If the material world is evil, then the body is evil. The body must be kept in place then, by rigorously holding it in check. How does one do this? "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Col. 2:21). Paul probably was quoting from the catchwords of the false teachers.
2. Between God and matter lie a host of fallen (evil) spiritual powers, who now rule the world. Jesus was the first of these rulers; He rules alongside other spiritual powers, such as the constellations named in the signs of the Zodiac and the angels. Therefore, He is only one of many bridges to God.
3. Some human beings possess a divine spark, an inner self that is different from the soul (the Gnostics were these human beings, of course). This inner self is the true home of such people, which they may reach through a mystical knowledge, a true seeing and hearing.
4. Redemption is ultimately dependent on the individual's self-understanding and the resulting freedom it provides, rather than on God. Hence the emphasis on knowledge of secrets rather than on faith.

Since Paul only alludes to their doctrines, we may have a hard time figuring out precisely what the false teachers were saying. However, we can make some educated guesses from what Paul criticizes and encourages. Some of the false doctrines were:

1. Ceremonialism. There were "strict rules about the kinds of permissible food and drink, religious festivals (Col. 2:16-17) and circumcision (Col. 2:11; Col. 3:11)."
2. Asceticism. Rules that Paul summarizes as, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch" (Col. 2:21) and "harsh treatment of the body" (Col. 2:23) were supposed to achieve purity.
3. Angel worship. See Col. 2:18.
4. Deprecation of Christ. Paul stressed Christ's supremacy (Col. 1:15-20; Col. 2:2-3, 9) against those who taught that Christ was on the level of a created angel.
5. Secret knowledge. Salvation required not just faith in Christ but knowledge of certain mysteries (Col. 2:3, 8).
6. Reliance on human wisdom and tradition. See Col. 2:4, 8. These elements seem to be drawn from "an extreme form of Judaism" from pagan ideas that later became a system called "Gnosticism" (from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge").