

Introduction to the Book of Colossians

Welcome.

We are going to be following a series of Bible studies on Paul's letter to the believers in Colossae, and to help us we are going to watch some videos along the way. You will see within your notes that it will refer out to the video. Sometimes I will use these and sometimes I won't. The guy leading the study on the video is a pastor named Louie Giglio. He is a pastor of a church in Atlanta Georgia. His focus throughout his calling has been to reach out to University Students in those highly influential years, and from that he created what today is called the Passion Conference.

We are going to work through Paul's letter with the necessary time that it needs. We won't rush this but it should be about 8 weeks. Each of you can access the participant's guide via our website, and I can share it now via Zoom. Also my transcript of this bible study will be available on the website for you to download.

The Participant guide will follow each week in the same format, of which you will get the answers either from my introductions or from the video. You have a section for your own notes about the passage. But then, and I realise that this is a stage further from our previous midweek bible studies, but it is important to come away from this and consider how this applies to you and me today. Straight after the study, before you do anything else, it would be great if you could take 10 mins to stop and using the reflection space to consider how it has impacted you today. And then into this week ahead to do something about it, so the final section called 'Live it out' gives you ideas on how you can live out the passage we have studied.

So this week I'm going to do the talking rather than have Louie's video and today we will cover a complete summary of the book, and then focus in on the first 14 verses of Chapter 1.

Introduction

For a complete summary in pictorial terms you can watch brilliant collection of videos from The Bible Project. Just go to YouTube and look up the Bible Project. There's one for Colossians which lasts about 9 minutes

<https://youtu.be/pXTXIDxQsvc>

Unlike today where we will typically use a phone call or send an email when we need to communicate with people, Paul would have written a letter where he wasn't able to visit people. Towards the end of his ministry, letter writing became his only means of communication because he was in prison a lot. Two years were spent in Casaerea awaiting trial and a further two years in Rome.

When he was in Rome he was under house arrest so he was able to receive visitors. And one such visitor was a man called Epaphras. It was through his discussions with Paul that the letter was written.

Paul writes 3 different types of letters : Letters to individuals, occasional letters to address specific issues in a church, and general letters for wider circulation. The letter to the Colossians was an occasional letter, but it was written alongside an individual letter to Philemon, and a general letter to the Ephesians. When we read about Tychicus he was the postman.

A letter written in the Greek world followed a familiar pattern : Name of the sender, the address of the receiver, a greeting, a compliment, the substance of the letter, a summary, a closing greeting, and then a signature.

So Paul is writing a letter from a prison and he's writing with a purpose. And that's an important lesson for all of us – that no matter what our situation is, no matter what the circumstances we are facing, God can still be at work in us and through us. So Paul is not allowing the environment, the situation he is in, the prison he is confined in, to any way think that it restricts God from what he wants to do.

So what about Colossae?

Colossae is in the western part of Turkey situated in a valley between Hierapolis and Laodicea. It was a major trade route from Ephesus to the Euphrates river and therefore had a mixed population. Travellers from all over Europe made their home there. Natives of Colossae were called Phrygians. The mixed population meant that the town had many different religions. Today it would be called a pluralistic society, where no one faith is dominant. 6 distinct beliefs were identified.

Aninism – the native Phrygians believes in the power of what were known as primitive spirits, where their powers were seen in the natural world.

Astrology – A belief that stars and planets can influence people’s lives

Greek & Roman gods – all the gods of Greece and Rome were in Colossae with their pagan practices.

Gnosticism - humans are divine souls trapped in the ordinary physical (or material) world. They say that the world was made by an imperfect spirit.

Judaism – not like that of the Holy Land. This was more philosophical, less moral and more mystical.

Christianity – Paul did not plant Christianity in Colossae. It was believed that Epaphras planed the first church. Epaphras was converted through Paul’s preaching and took the gospel to his home town of Colossae.

So what was happening in Colossae and what is Paul’s main point?

Wrong teaching and the environment of a multi-cultural Colossae meant that wrong teaching was affecting the Church. Paul is arguing against all the ideologies of the culture.

When you mix ideas and philosophies into Christianity you create an idea called syncretism. When the Christian faith is mingled with other faiths, the message of Christ is no longer prominent. So Paul is writing against deceptive philosophies that claimed to offer fullness and freedom. He is concerned that people in Colossae are being tricked into believing that Christ was not enough. This reminds us of the dangers of religious practices entering the Church. Can you think of things that can enter into the life of today’s Church that are not coming from a Christian foundation?

Answer : organisations using our facilities that do not align to a Christian ethos, Yoga classes, Government legislation that tries to impact the beliefs of the Church

So Paul’s major feature of his letter is that the Church is affected by two things :

- The immanence of God : they had lost their sense that God is both transcendent and immanent, meaning he is both far above us and also near to us. You must have both. God must be considered both greater than the universe, and nearer than breathing. Those in Colossae were in danger of seeing God as a distant being and therefore beyond reach. Therefore they needed to fill the gap with other beliefs.
- The pre-eminence of Jesus : they concerned that Jesus was too low for their thinking. Jesus was being placed alongside other being. They had failed to realise his position as Lord of creation and head of the Church. (This would be very similar to Jehovah's Witnesses who consider Jesus as a created being but not God himself).

Therefore the major points of this letter from Paul is the supremacy and the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. He is everything, he is the Lord, and he is all we need.

There were two non-Christian practices that had become part of their lives :

- They had become obsessed with observing different festivals;
- The Greek practice of abstinence was popular (we don't need to be so obsessed with refraining from things when God has given us things to enjoy. We do have to living consistently in Christ every day).

Paul knew that those in Colossae focussed on fullness of life being found in their practices, but Paul uses the same language to tell them that 'all the fullness of God dwells in Christ' (2:9).

Summary of Paul's Letter

- Paul highlights that it is possible for someone, having started on the road to salvation, may never reach then end. He says that the hope of heaven will only happen 'if you continue in your faith' (1:23). He is concerned that they will be led astray by the myriad of ideas that are afflicting the believers.
- Paul encourages that once we have come to faith in Christ, we must continue to trust him. The letter is full of exhortations to continue in him.

Paul desires that people will come back around the simplicity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He wants to bring everyone round the centrality, the supremacy,

and the sufficiency of Jesus. Jesus is the beginning of everything, he is the end of everything, and he is the centre of everything. All of this is affected by the power of what Jesus Christ has done for you and me. Christ did all the work, and put us in a right relationship with God. There is no need for anything else to be added by us. It's what Christ has done.

READ COLOSSIANS 1:1-14

Verses 1-2

- we now should understand the context of this letter from what we have discussed already

Verses 3-8

- So we know that Epaphras has shared the gospel message with them.
- **QUESTION - What kinds of things does Paul point out about the church in these verses?** (Paul pointed out their faith (v4), love (v4), hope (v5), how they're bearing fruit (v6), and how they understood God's grace (v6).
- **QUESTION - Where have you heard those terms Faith, Hope and Love?** (1 Corinthians 13)
- Paul expresses that they have love for all of God's people, that they have faith in Jesus Christ, and that they express the hope that stored for them in heaven. What does it look like practically to be full of faith, hope and love?

So Paul recognizes the Colossians' true understanding of the gospel when they first believed. Now he continues his encouragement in the next section of verses.

Verses 9-14

- Look at verse 3 and verse 9 in similarity. Why do you think it is important for Paul and Timothy to emphasise that they are praying for them? They pray that God would fill these people with the knowledge of his will through all wisdom and understanding that comes from the Spirit. Since coming to this church family, I have been so encouraged when people tell me that they pray for me each and every day. The example of someone praying for you is a great model for maturing in the faith. Christians who are mature can give us an example of what it looks like to follow Jesus. This is how Paul describes and models what a life worthy of

God looks like – bearing fruit, growing in knowledge, strengthened by God, endures, is patient, and gives thanks (verses 10&11).

- Paul prays that God would fill the Colossians with the knowledge of His will. The Greek work for knowledge is *epignosis*. When Paul uses this word, he often refers to the knowledge of God. Rather than knowledge being an intellectual understanding of God, Paul uses it to express the personal knowledge of God Christians experience through relationship with Him. This type of knowledge produces wisdom and understanding, but for Paul, mere head knowledge isn't the end of the line. Knowing God should fundamentally change us, which trickles down into our everyday actions.
- To Paul, following God begins in the mind and heart, and then expresses itself through action. QUESTION - **What has it looked like in your walk with Christ to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding?**
- Paul sums up this section in verses 12–14. The reason we're even able to know God and follow Him is because of Jesus. He has brought us into a new kingdom—the kingdom of light. Louie puts it this way, "It's not what you do that brings you to life spiritually. It's what God does for you that makes you a follower of Jesus and brings you to life spiritually." QUESTION - **What difference does it make in your relationship with God when you operate as if you have to "do something" in order to gain spiritual life?**
- And this was the problem with the influence that was seen all around the Colossian church. It felt that it had to do things to fill gaps. The Colossians had added to the gospel message in several ways. QUESTION – **So for us, what kinds of things do we sometimes add to the gospel message?** (We sometimes believe we have to do certain things in order to be more of a Christian, becoming ever busier in the local church, keep up to date with all your bible readings, pray great prayers)
- Verse 13 the word Dominion is used – the greek is the word *exousias*. This word refers to authority, the holder of authority, or a sphere of authority. What Paul means by *exousias* is that through Christ, our ultimate authority has changed. We were once under the *exousia*—or authority—of darkness: of Satan, sin, and death. Now through the redemption and forgiveness brought through Jesus, we have been brought into the kingdom of light under the authority of Christ. QUESTION – **how does it make you feel when you realise that we have been rescued from that authority of darkness?**

Conclusion

- Living a life worthy of God is only possible through Jesus. He made a way for us to be reunited with God and gives us the Holy Spirit so we can grow in maturity. So the Holy Spirit fills us and gives us all we need to pursue maturity in Christ—all beginning with the knowledge of God.
When did you first hear and understand the gospel message?
- To be a mature follower of Christ is to know God and His gospel so fully that it permeates every inch of our lives. It's a life full of the Spirit and characterized by love, hope, and faith. Living this way begins with the simple truth that God has delivered us from sin and death by the work of His Son. We are now under His rule, free to follow Him wherever He leads.
- The Colossians had fallen away from the true gospel, adding to it and making Christianity like an exclusive club. They had forgotten the simple truth we read in verses 13 and 14 of chapter one. As we go about this week, let's remind ourselves of the truth of the gospel. Let's pray God would reveal to us the ways we've wrongly added to the gospel message as we study Colossians.
- We also talked about what it means to live a life worthy of God in this session. A worthy life looks like a transformed heart, which overflows into how we treat other people, what we say, and our attitude towards the things God asks us to do. It begins with God giving us the knowledge of Himself through the Spirit. This week, let's ask God to help us know Him better and reflect what we know about Him through our actions.
See the Live it out section.

Actions for the week ahead

Select at least one activity from below to complete before next week.

Pray: When you pray this week, thank God for delivering you from sin and death. Pray for His Spirit to show you what it means to live a life that reflects the salvation you've received as you study Colossians.

Memorize: Commit Colossians 1:13–14 to memory this week. Write it on a card or create a background for your phone with the verse. Recite it to yourself to remind you of what God has done for you.

Write: Take ten minutes to write out the gospel story as simply as possible. Reflect on ways you might have added or taken away from it and ask God to refresh the gospel message in you this week.

Act: As an expression of gratitude to God, choose one way to show someone God's love this week. Help your spouse with something on their to-do list, send a friend flowers, or tidy a neighbour's garden before the hard frosts come. As you do, pray for the person you're serving.

Thank: Send a thank you text, note, or email to the people in your life who led you to Jesus. Tell them how God used them in your life to grow closer to Him.