

Colossians Introduction and Overview
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Authorship

- Pauline authorship is claimed in Col 1:1 and 4:18.
- Tradition affirms Paul wrote this epistle (Irenaeus; Tertullian; Clement of Alexandria).
- Some modern scholars challenge this, with some claiming that Colossians is a (poor) imitation of Ephesians, although it is possible that Colossians was written first.
- Although there are some noticeable differences between Colossians and Ephesians, and Colossians and Paul's other epistles, there are many similarities, such as the emphasis of being "in Christ," being freed from sin, and the new humanity. Differences can be partly explained by the false teaching that Paul was confronting.
- The connection with Philemon, which is almost universally held to be Pauline, also supports that Paul wrote this epistle.
- Overall, there is no compelling reason to reject Pauline authorship of Colossians.
- Colossians was probably written from a Roman prison or house arrest around AD 60-61; Philemon was likely written at the same time as Colossians.
- The epistle was carried by Tychicus (from Asia Province) and Onesimus (4:7-9); Epaphras with Paul (4:12-13; Phlm 23)

Paul's Imprisonment

- Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are sometimes called the Prison (or Captivity) Epistles. Colossians was likely sent together with Philemon and Ephesians (Colossae and Ephesus are about 120 miles apart).
- Rome has traditionally been understood as the place of imprisonment (house arrest), which fits well with Acts (28:30-31, "two whole years"; e.g., AD 60-62). No other imprisonment recorded in Acts seems like (e.g., 16:23-40; 24:27). Moreover, Onesimus would more plausibly seek anonymity in Rome, whereas he might have been recognized in Ephesus.
- Others claim that the distance between Colossae and Rome (about 1200 miles) would be too great and dangerous for Onesimus to undertake. Also, since Paul indicates that he hopes to visit Colossae if released from prison (Phlm 22), some claim that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus (perhaps inferred from 2 Cor 1:8; c. AD 52-56). But there is no mention of this in the NT, although Paul indicates imprisonments that are not mentioned elsewhere (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23).

Colossae – The City

- The tell (unexcavated mound) was discovered and identified in 1835. Excavation was supposed to have started in 2003 but has been delayed several times.
- Colossae is located in ancient Phrygia, on the Lycus River; it was in the Roman province of Asia (western modern Turkey).

- Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea form a triangle in the Lycus Valley; they are within view of each other.
- This valley is fertile, with large crops of figs and olives. Colossae (and the surrounding area) was (and still is) known for its wool.
- Colossae was located on the road to Ephesus (100 miles to west); but the road was later moved and Colossae began to lose importance. It was surpassed by Laodicea and Hierapolis, particularly in wool production.
- By time of Paul, Colossae had declined considerably. Paul never visited Colossae, since his strategy was to target large urban centers.
- Colossae was heavily damaged by a major earthquake that also destroyed Laodicea in AD60-61. Laodicea restored with its own resources; Colossae was rebuilt but never fully recovered.
- Colossae had a diverse population including indigenous Phrygians, Greek settlers, Jews brought from Babylon by Antiochus III in the 2nd c. BC. There was a mixing of pagan cults, mystery religions, Greek gods and philosophies, Judaism, and eastern religions.
- Such a diverse population makes false teaching quite likely.

Colossae – The Church

- The first believers were not converted by Paul, but by Epaphras (who was likely converted by Paul in Ephesus (1:7-8; 4:12).
- Consider Paul’s strategy: while based in Ephesus, Luke makes the remarkable claim that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).
- Epaphras was a citizen of Colossae (4:12). The house church in Colossae met in Philemon’s house and include the (former) slave Onesimus
- Most likely Epaphras asked advice from Paul for dealing with false teaching (1:3-8; 2:5).

The Colossian “Heresy”

- The tone of letter is to be on guard against those who lead the Colossian believers into the bondage of false teaching (2:1-23) and sinful practices (3:5-11).
- There is no consensus about the nature (or even the existence) of this heresy; it must be inferred from Paul’s exhortations.
- Colossians 2:8-23 suggests a specific false teaching (especially vv. 18, 21, 23)
- It seems to have been some mix of Jewish mysticism/legalism, Greek philosophic speculation, and pagan practices that claimed to offer the appearance of advanced spirituality.

Paul’s Approach

- He focuses on the supremacy of Jesus Christ; he is the agent of creation and redemption (1:15-20).

- He refutes any dualism between the physical (bad) and spiritual (good); hence, the way to God is not to be delivered from evil (physical) matter (either through licentiousness or asceticism), but to be in Christ.
- He focuses on what believers already have in Christ: hope in heaven, an eternal inheritance, being in the Kingdom; all this is necessary for their salvation and sanctification, etc.
- He offers strong warnings to be on guard spiritually.
- He challenges human (non-Christian) traditions and focuses on apostolic tradition, namely, that the Colossians have received Christ, in whom all the fullness of “godness” dwells (1:19) and “the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3).
- He reveals that Christ alone is over all principalities and powers (1:16).
- He instructs that God’s gifts are to be enjoyed through proper use and opposes asceticism, legalism, and licentiousness.
- He stresses that only a relationship with Christ can deal with the flesh and shows that false teaching leads to bondage.

Colossians – Outline

- I. Introduction and Prayer, 1:1–14
 - A. Greeting, 1:1–2
 - B. Thanksgiving, 3–8
 - C. Prayer, 9–14

- II. The Supremacy of Christ, 1:15–2:7
 - A. The Firstborn of Creation, 1:15–17
 - B. The Firstborn of the Death, 1:18–20
 - C. The Mystery of God, 1:24–2:7

- III. False Teachings, 2:8–23
 - A. Philosophy and Empty Deceit, 2:8–15
 - B. Specific Examples of False Teaching, 2:16–23

- IV. The New Humanity, 3:1–4:6
 - A. Died and Now with Christ, 3:1–4
 - B. Putting Off the Old, Putting On the New, 3:5–17
 - C. Household Codes, 3:18–4:1
 - D. Prayer and Paul’s Petition, 4:2-5

- V. Final Greetings, 4:7–18