

## Introducing Colossians

**AIM.** This study provides the background for discussing the most interesting parts of Colossians over the next month or two. By the end you should be able to put yourself in the shoes of one of the people who first read this letter and think about how it applies to your life.

### Outline of the Letter

1. 1:1–14, Greetings, thanksgiving and prayer.\*
2. 1:15–23, Christ and the Gospel.
3. 1:24–2:7, Paul's attitude to ministry.
4. 2:8–32, Compromises with Jewish and Pagan philosophies and with Jewish laws, which undermine freedoms attained in Christ.
5. 3:1–4:1, Christian conduct, incl. household codes from 3:18.
6. 4:2–6, Closing exhortations.\*
7. 4:7–18, Comments addressed to specific people.\*

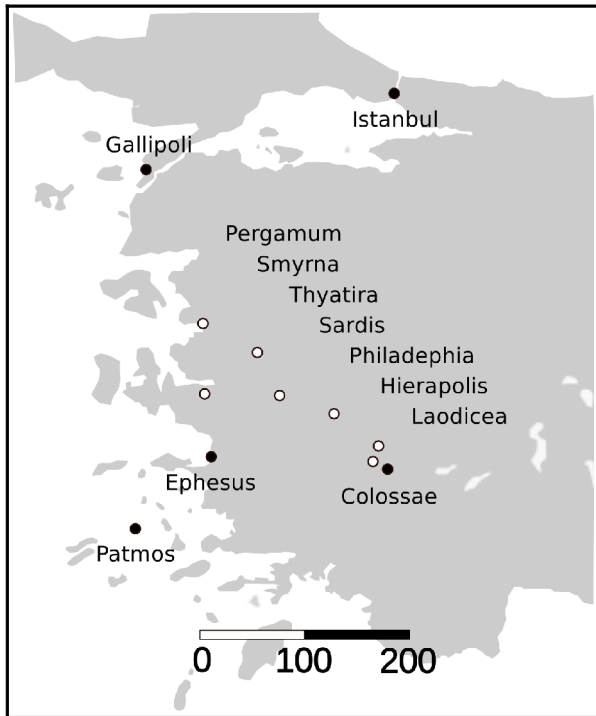
\* Tonight we'll cover parts #7, #1 and #6 – the seemingly lightweight material – and ask why Paul wrote a letter to to church he had probably never visited.

### #7 • Colossae and Paul's Co-workers

In the first century Colossae was a town in Phrygia, now south-western Turkey. It was situated within 20 kms of Hierapolis and Laodicea in the Lycus river valley. *Colossinum* was a fine red-dyed wool which was floated down-river to the coast for export. Though Colossae was once located on two major trade routes, one had by this time taken a different course, and the city was growing smaller. The population is hard to estimate; the general rule of thumb is to count the seats in the amphitheatre and multiply by ten; thus Laodicea peaked at around 100,000; but while Colossae was described as a large city by Xenophon in the fourth century BCE, it was probably not half the size of Laodicea, and was well in decline by Paul's day.

Like any Roman town the pagan religions enjoyed establishment preference and popular support. Apart from the traditional religions of each area, the Greco-Roman pantheon and the Emperor himself would also be worshipped, amongst other new ventures such as the initiations of secretive mystery religions. Colossae was only 200 kms from Ephesus, one of the world's largest commercial and cultic centres, and had no shortage of religious and philosophical options. No-one knows exactly to what Col 2:20's "elemental spirits" refers, but it seems to best fit a Greco-Roman background for many in the Christian community. There had been Jewish populations in Phrygia as early as the sixth century BCE, and Antiochus III had notably settled 2,000 Jewish families in there in 214 BCE. Some syncretism or intermarriage is believed to have occurred, as excavations of Phrygian temples have found traditionally Jewish names in their lists of office-bearers. Tacitus reports the Lycus Valley cities were largely destroyed by an earthquake in 61 CE, which cannot be long after this letter was written. Each was later rebuilt to some extent, but while Laodicea went from strength to

strength, Colossae was eventually abandoned and was used as a quarry by the eighth century CE. Its ruins have never been excavated.



Paul had probably never been to Colossae, certainly didn't know most of the church there; and couldn't visit them at the time of writing since he was in prison (4:3–4, note the parallels with Php 1). Hence this letter addresses them and the church in Laodicea as some of those “who have not seen me face-to-face” (2:1). On conventional dating, Paul spent two years in Ephesus in the mid-50s. Regarding this period, Acts 19:10 makes the hyperbolic claim that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (compare Col 1:6, 23). It is probably fair to say that every city in the region had business in Ephesus, and some of the Jews and Pagans who met and studied there with Paul began Christian communities when they returned home. This seems the best way to account for his knowledge

of only a few members of the Colossian church, but for knowing them as associates (4:7–17). He says they heard the gospel from “Epaphras our beloved fellow-servant” (1:7), “one of yourselves” (4:12) – and not from himself. He has only heard of these developments (1:9), however much they are a matter of delight and even pride to him. The letters to Colossae and Laodicea (4:16) would have been carried by hand by Tychicus and Onesimus, whom Paul notes having sent to them (4:7–9).

The Letter to the Colossians is closely connected with the Book of Revelation, the letter to Philemon, and the Letter to the Ephesians. Revelation was written from Patmos, not far off the coast, and addressed to the churches of seven cities in the area, including Laodicea. Paul's letter to Colossae refers to Mark, Luke, Demas, Aristarchus and Epaphras as co-workers who send their greetings (4:10–14), the same set of names that appear in Philemon 23–24. That letter pleads for the safe return of a runaway slave called Onesimus; if he is the same Onesimus mentioned as “one of yourselves” in 4:9, this presumably locates Philemon nearby and adds some punch to the reference to slave-owners in 4:1. Finally, the Letter to the Ephesians is the closest parallel to Colossians in the New Testament, with very similar concerns and distinctives, identical wording in places – and they were even delivered by the same hand (Tychicus, Eph 6:21–22). Thus the two are usually thought to be closely related, and to represent the same stage in Paul's life. Read them in parallel, if interested.

## Questions

1. What is our “shared horizon” with Paul and with the Christians in first century Colossae? (And what is different?) Why would this letter be relevant to us? This is a good question to keep asking over the coming weeks.

## #1, #6 • Paul's Prayers and Thanksgiving

Excluding formalities and personal notes, here is how Paul starts and ends his letter (NRSV):

### Col 1:3–14 • Thanksgiving and prayer

<sup>3</sup>In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup>for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup>because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. <sup>7</sup>This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, <sup>8</sup>and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

<sup>9</sup>For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup>so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. <sup>11</sup>May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup>He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

### Col 4:2-6 • Closing Exhortations

<sup>2</sup>Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. <sup>3</sup>At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, <sup>4</sup>so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

<sup>5</sup>Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. <sup>6</sup>Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

## Questions

1. *Optional.* This is how Paul introduced himself to a group of people who had heard of him but never met him. Why does he choose to write like this?
2. Read through a verse at a time and write down: For what does he pray (or seek prayer) and give thanks? – *Brainstorm:* What does this say about him?
3. Do we have “outsiders”? (4:5–6) – If you grew up in church, how did you learn to think about such people, and how does Paul think about them here? What sort of answers do you have to give “outsiders” in your everyday life?
4. *Optional.* Paul can't write more than a few paragraphs without echoing the Old Testament. If you have a Old Testament handy, compare Col 1:9 with Ex 31:3 and Isa 11:2–3. What kinds of wisdom does this suggest he has in mind?
5. *Advanced.* The arguments for and against Paul (*vs.* one of his early followers) having written Colossians and Ephesians end up asking whether their theology is the same as Paul's other letters. If you want to study Paul in depth, this is a good place to dive in.