

THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

ORIENTING DATA FOR COLOSSIANS

- Content: a letter encouraging relatively new believers to continue in the truth of Christ they have received, and warning them against outside religious influences
- Author: the apostle Paul, joined by his younger companion Timothy
- Date: probably A.D. 60–61 (if Paul is in Rome, as is most likely)
- Recipient(s): the (mostly Gentile) believers in Colosse (Colosse was the least significant of three towns noted for their medicinal spas [including Hierapolis and Laodicea] at a crucial crossroads in the Lycus River Valley, approximately 120 miles southwest of Ephesus); the letter is also to be read, as an exchange, in Laodicea (4:16)
- Occasion: Epaphras, a Pauline coworker who had founded the churches in the Lycus Valley, has recently come to Paul bringing news of the church, mostly good but some less so
- Emphases: the absolute supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ, the Son of God; that Christ both forgives sin and removes one from the terror of “the powers”; religious rules and regulations count for nothing, but ethical life that bears God’s own image counts for everything; Christlike living affects relationships of all kinds

OVERVIEW OF COLOSSIANS

Although Paul has never personally been to Colosse (2:1), he knows much about the believers there and considers them one of *his* churches—through his coworker Epaphras (1:7–8). His primary concern is that they stand firm in what they have been taught (1:23; 2:6–16; 3:1). After a glowing thanksgiving and encouraging prayer report (1:3–12), much of the first half of the letter reiterates the truth of the gospel they have received (1:13–22; 2:2–3, 6–7, 9–15). The rest of these two chapters exposes the follies of the errors to which some are being attracted (2:4, 8, 16–23). One may rightly guess, therefore, that the emphases in Paul’s recounting the gospel are also there in response to the errors.

At the heart of the errors is a desire to regulate Christian life with rules about externals—“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (2:21, which sounds very much like certain forms of present-day Christianity). Most of chapters 3–4, therefore, take up the nature of genuinely Christian behavior. “Rules” and “regulations” have an appearance of wisdom, but no real value (2:23). Christian behavior results from having died and been raised with Christ (2:20; 3:1) and now being “hidden with Christ in God” (3:3), thus expressing itself “in the image of [the] Creator” (3:10). Note especially that the imperatives that flow out of these realities (3:12–4:6) are primarily directed toward community life, not toward individual one-on-one life with God.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING COLOSSIANS

As you read Colossians, you will want to be looking for four things. First, since so much that is said in Colossians is in direct (and indirect) response to some false teaching, be on the lookout for everything Paul says about these errors. Even though this matter does not emerge in a direct way until 2:4, by the time you are finished with chapter 2 you cannot help but see how important it is. Probably, therefore, much of what is said in 1:13–23 also was written with an eye toward what was falsely being taught.

Because of its importance for understanding this letter, a lot of scholarly energy has been devoted to the *false teaching*, trying to match it with what is otherwise known (or guessed at) in the Greco-Roman world. But at the end of the day all we know about it is what Paul says in this letter. We can't even be sure that there were "false teachers" as such; Paul's references are invariably to "anyone," "no one," etc. (2:4, 8, 16, 18). In any case, as you read, at least be looking for the various elements found in these errors.

The most obvious element is its Jewish flavor, which includes circumcision (2:11, 13), food laws, and the observance of the Jewish religious calendar (2:16); for Paul these are simply a written code standing over against us (2:14), merely "human commands and teachings" (2:22) that Christ has done away with. This element is apparently mixed with superstitions about angelic or spiritual powers (1:16; 2:8, 15, 18, 20), which seem also to have a powerful appeal both as divine "philosophy"—elite wisdom—(2:3, 8, 20) and divine "mystery" (1:26; 2:2). These teachings also seem to be in conflict with the physical side of Christ's earthly life and redemption (1:19, 22; 2:9).

Second, you will not be able to miss Paul's primary emphasis on the absolute *supremacy of Christ* over all things. This begins in 1:13, as the thanksgiving gives way to the exaltation of the Son, and carries through verse 22. It then recurs at every key point in the letter. Paul argues that Christ is the key to everything they need. All that God is ever going to do in and for the world has happened in and through him (1:19; 2:2–3, 9, 13–15, 20; 3:1). Paul also emphasizes the absolute supremacy of Christ over the powers, including Christ's role in creation and redemption. Christ is the whole package, so don't let go of him. He is the true "Head" trip (1:18; 2:10, 19).

Third, you will now want to think through the *situation in the church* one more time. Paul has never been there, but he has heard of their genuine faith in Christ. Notice the ways he tries to encourage them (1:3–12; 2:2; etc.), but note also the warnings (1:23; 2:4; etc.). At the same time think about how some things are said precisely because they do not know Paul personally but only through Epaphras. This is especially true of 1:24–2:5, where he sets his calling and ministry before them, especially in terms of the Gentile mission and what God has done through him by the power of the Spirit.

Fourth, at the end you may wish to read the whole letter again, this time with the knowledge that Onesimus (4:9) is being returned to Philemon for forgiveness, so Paul is preparing the church to *receive Onesimus* back as well (see Philemon). Read it at least once as

you think Onesimus might have heard it; then perhaps try to put yourself in the shoes of a member of the church in Colosse.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 359–361.