

# COLOSSIANS

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## BACKGROUND

The Colossian church was probably founded by Epaphras ([Col. 1:7](#); [Col. 4:12-13](#)) as the result of Paul's work in Ephesus (A.D. 55-58; [Acts 19](#)). With Paul now under house arrest in Rome ([Col. 4:3](#), [10](#), [18](#); [Acts 28:30-31](#)), Epaphras visited him and told him of heresies plaguing the Colossians. Paul wrote this letter to warn them against those false teachings that on the one hand obscured the majesty and glory of Christ ([Col. 1:15](#); [Col. 2:8](#)) and on the other hand introduced asceticism ([Col. 2:16-23](#)). The false teaching was a mixture of ceremonial Judaism ([Col. 2:16](#)) and oriental theosophy ([Col. 2:18](#)) that opposed the simplicity and freedom of the gospel and vital union with Christ the risen Lord ([Col. 2:19](#); [Col. 3:1](#)). It was probably an early form of Gnosticism. See exposition on [§Col. 2:4-10](#).

## AUTHOR

Paul ([Col. 1:1](#), [23](#); [Col. 4:18](#); see [Romans: Author](#)).

## DATE

A.D. 60-61, about the same time Paul wrote Ephesians.

» **See also:** [Illustration: Epistles of Paul, The](#)

## RECIPIENTS

Christians in Colosse, 100 miles east of Ephesus, whom Paul had never personally visited ([Col. 1:4](#), [7-8](#); [Col. 2:1](#)). Colossian believers apparently met in at least two different homes, those of Nympha ([Col. 4:15](#)) and of Philemon. Paul's letter to Philemon mentions a church meeting in his home ([Philemon 1:2](#)). That he lived in Colosse is suggested by the mentions of Archippus ([Col. 4:17](#); see exposition on [§Philemon 1:1-3](#)) and Onesimus ([Col. 4:9](#); [Philemon 1:8-16](#)) in both letters.

## PURPOSE

- To tell the Colossians of Paul's care for them and concern for their spiritual development and to relay ministry-related information ([Col. 1:1-12](#); [Col. 4:7-18](#))
- To present Jesus Christ as preeminent in all things ([Col. 1:13-29](#)) and to warn against any heresy that would distract from that preeminence ([Col. 2](#))
- To encourage holiness ([Col. 3:1-4:6](#))

## UNIQUE FEATURES

- Colossians is the most Christological of Paul's letters, containing the Bible's sharpest picture of Christ's preeminence ([Col. 1:14-22](#)).
- It contains the Bible's strongest warning against the dangers of human philosophy ([Col. 2:8](#)).
- The shorter form of Paul's benediction, characteristic of his later letters, occurs for the first time here ([Col. 4:18](#); [1 Tim. 6:21](#); [2 Tim. 4:22](#); [Titus 3:15](#)).

## COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

### *Galatians:*

- Galatians combats national exclusivism; Colossians combats intellectual exclusivism.

### *Ephesians:*

See [Ephesians: Comparison with Other Bible Books](#).

### *Ephesians, Philemon, Philippians, and 2 Timothy:*

- Paul wrote these and Colossians from prison.

### *1 John:*

- Both combat the problems of empty ritualism and of humanistic philosophies such as Gnosticism.

## OUTLINE

### 1. THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST ([Col. 1:1-2:3](#))

1. Salutation; thanksgiving for Colossians ([Col. 1:1-8](#))
2. Prayer for the Colossians ([Col. 1:9-14](#))
- C. Christ's character ([Col. 1:15-23](#))
- D. Paul's sufferings for Christ ([Col. 1:24-2:3](#))

### II. THE BETTER WAY OF CHRIST ([Col. 2:4-3:4](#))

- A. Better than philosophy ([Col. 2:4-10](#))
- B. Better than legalism ([Col. 2:11-17](#))
- C. Better than mysticism ([Col. 2:18-19](#))
- D. Better than asceticism ([Col. 2:20-23](#))
- E. Focusing on Christ ([Col. 3:1-4](#))

### III. PRACTICING THE LIFE OF CHRIST ([Col. 3:5-4:18](#))

- A. In personal life ([Col. 3:5-17](#))
- B. In household life ([Col. 3:18-4:1](#))
- C. In witnessing ([Col. 4:2-6](#))
- D. Greetings; final instructions ([Col. 4:7-18](#))

## TIMELINE

A.D. 35:	Paul's conversion
c. A.D. 55-58:	Paul in Ephesus, Epaphras in Colosse
A.D. 60-62:	Paul imprisoned in Rome, writes Colossians
c. A.D. 67:	Paul martyred

**[Col. 1:1-8](#)** *"Thank God for your testimony!"* Though he had not personally worked with the Colossians (see [Col. 2:1](#)), Paul commended them for their faith in God and love for the saints of God, of which he had heard from Epaphras.

**[Col. 1:9-14](#)** *"Now let me pray for you."* Paul prayed that they would find God's perfect will, which included personal holiness, fruitfulness, and power in their Christian lives ([Col. 1:9-12](#)). This was all possible because of God's mighty act of redemption on their behalf through Jesus Christ ([Col. 1:13-14](#)).

**[Col. 1:15-23](#)** *The preeminence of the preeminent one.* Christ "is first in everything" because he "existed before everything else began" ([Col. 1:17](#)).

- He is the very "image" of God ([Col. 1:15](#)). The Greek signifies not that he is simply like God but that he is God, for the very "fullness" of God dwells in him ([Col. 1:19](#); see [Col. 2:9](#); [Ephes. 1:23](#); [Ephes. 3:19](#); [Ephes. 4:13](#)).
- He created all things in heaven and on earth for his glory, and continues to hold it all together ([Col. 1:16-17](#)).
- He is the head of the church ([Col. 1:18](#)). Concerning "first of all who will rise from the dead" ([Col. 1:18](#)), see exposition on [1 Corinthians 15:20-28](#).
- He is in the process of reconciling everything in the universe to himself ([Col. 1:20](#)). That is, he is bringing all things into a right relationship with the Father. This does not mean that everyone will be reconciled to God (universalism), but anyone who so desires can be ([Col. 1:21-23](#)). This reconciliation began at the Cross and will be complete at the sound of the seventh trumpet (see [Rev. 11:15](#)).

**[Col. 1:24-29](#)** *The Gentile mystery (and other mysteries).* Paul saw his present suffering ([Col. 1:24-25](#)) as a partnership in Christ's sufferings (see [2 Cor. 1:5](#)) and as an important part of his ministry to believers (see [2 Cor. 12:15](#)). That ministry involved proclaiming a message that had been "kept secret for centuries and generations past," namely, that Christ would now indwell believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews ([Col. 1:27](#); see [Col. 4:3](#); [Romans 11:25](#); [Romans 16:25](#); [Ephes. 3:1-13](#); [Ephes. 6:19](#)).

The Greek word used in [Col. 1:26](#) is the word for *mystery*, and that is how it has traditionally been translated. However, Paul always used the term to describe not some mystical experience but various parts of God's plan that had been previously hidden and had now been revealed (see [Col. 2:2, 9](#); [1 Cor. 2:7-8](#); [1 Cor. 15:51](#); [Ephes. 5:32](#); [2 Thes. 2:7](#); [1 Tim. 3:16](#); for other NT occurrences, see [Matthew 13:11](#); [Rev. 1:20](#); [Rev. 10:7](#); [Rev. 17:5](#)).

"What remains of Christ's sufferings" ([Col. 1:24](#)) does not mean that Christ's suffering was inadequate to save. It may mean that Paul's sufferings provided a more immediate testimony for his contemporaries. Or "Christ's sufferings" may mean afflictions that Christians suffer for Christ.

**[Col. 2:1-3](#)** *"My deep concern for you . . ."* Paul's suffering for the Colossians was internal as well as external, as he earnestly desired that both they and the Laodiceans—and all other believers whom he did not know personally—would come to full maturity in Christ and would be knit together by strong ties of love. This they could do by abiding in Christ, who embodies "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

**[Col. 2:4-10](#)** *Wily words vs. completeness in Christ.* Lest the Colossians be fooled by the smooth talk of false teachers ([Col. 2:4-3:4](#)), Paul reminded them of the foundations of their faith ([Col. 2:4-7](#)). Though human philosophy might sound good, the Colossians had in Christ all the divine revelation they would ever need ([Col. 2:8-10](#); see [Col. 2:3](#)), for he is fully God (see exposition on [§Col. 1:15-23](#)).

The non-Christian teaching Paul was concerned about was probably an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics taught dualism: that God was good while all matter was evil. Salvation for Gnostics came only through a vast series of spiritual intermediaries, whom the chosen few could approach through a specially revealed knowledge. Gnostics called these intermediaries the "fullness" of God. Paul taught that Christ himself, by himself, constituted this fullness (see [Col. 3:10](#) and exposition on [§Col. 1:15-23](#)). Various Gnostic teachings are reflected throughout Colossians, such as their angel worship (see [Col. 2:18](#)) and asceticism (see [Col. 2:21](#)). Paul's concern with Gnosticism may be reflected in other letters as well (see [1 Cor. 2:6-8](#); [1 Cor. 8:1](#); [1 Cor. 13:8](#); [1 Tim. 1:4](#); [1 Tim. 4:3](#); [1 Tim. 6:20](#)). Gnosticism was probably a key element in the heresies John would later describe as the "spirit of the Antichrist" (see exposition on [§1 John 4:1-6](#)).

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**Col. 2:11-17** *"The charges against you have been dropped!"* Paul now turned his attention to the Judaizers. Even uncircumcised Gentiles are declared forgiven when they turn to Christ ([Col. 2:11-13](#)), for by fulfilling the law, Christ has done away with the need to be justified on the basis of law ([Col. 2:14](#); see exposition on [§Ephes. 2:11-22](#)). Christ's fulfilling of the law and his triumph over death have removed Satan's power to accuse us—a power that was based on the law's power to condemn us ([Col. 2:15](#); see exposition on [§Romans 4:13-25](#) and on [§Romans 8:1-4](#)). Therefore the Judaizers had no right to judge the Gentile Colossians.

The believer's baptism ([Col. 2:12](#)) symbolizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit that places one into the church, the body of Christ (see exposition on [§1 Corinthians 12:12-31](#)). On "with him you were raised," compare [Ephes. 2:5-6](#).

**Col. 2:18-19** *"Avoid those who adore angels."* Those who promote the worship of angels (see exposition on [§Col. 2:4-10](#)) are cheating believers out of their right to direct access to the Father through Christ.

**Col. 2:20-23** *"Avoid advocates of asceticism."* Paul warned also against the false humility ([Col. 2:18, 23](#)) of an asceticism that could have been connected with either Jewish legalism or Gnosticism. Such teaching may seem moral and religious, but it cannot change the heart, and that is where real change must begin.

**Col. 3:1-4** *Our heavenly focus.* Paul's warnings against false teachings (see [Col. 2:4-23](#)) and his exhortations to holiness ([Col. 3:5-4:6](#)) are connected by a call to shift our focus from earthly things to all that we now have and will someday have in Christ.

**Col. 3:5-17** *What to wear, what not to wear.* Believers should "get rid of" the worldly clothes of sin that they wore before conversion ([Col. 3:5-11](#)) and clothe themselves with righteousness and love ([Col. 3:12-15](#)). This process can be greatly aided by Bible study, worship, and Christian fellowship ([Col. 3:16-17](#)). On "God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves" ([Col. 3:12](#)), see exposition on [§1 Peter 1:1-2](#).

**Col. 3:18-4:1** *Rules for the roles.* Paul discussed behaviors appropriate in various human relationships (see exposition on [§Ephes. 5:22-6:9](#)).

**Col. 4:2-6** *"We can both have a great witness!"* Paul requested prayer that God would provide "many opportunities" for the gospel even from the confines of his house arrest ([Col. 4:2-4](#)). Meanwhile, he exhorted the Colossians to behave wisely toward nonbelievers so that they too might be effective witnesses.

**Col. 4:7-18** *"From all of us to all of you . . ."* Paul sent greetings from several Christian friends and coworkers ([Col. 4:7-15](#)) and instructed the Colossians to exchange letters from him with the church at Laodicea (see exposition on [§Rev. 3:14-22](#)). Some have suggested that the letter in the possession of the Laodiceans may have been Ephesians (see [Ephesians: Recipients](#)).