

Paul's Letter to the Colossian Church  
Lesson 1

Set Your Mind on the Things Above

This letter to the church in Colossae closely resembles the letter written by Paul to the church in Ephesus. The outline is basically the same. The thoughts are basically the same. The points of emphasis are basically the same. While this is a shorter letter, Paul's message to the Colossae differed from the Ephesian letter in one area. Where the Ephesian letter dwelt on the mystery of God and the love of the Ephesian church, this letter also mentions these things yet it dwells on the area of "setting your mind on the things above." In other words, Paul wants the Colossians to be above the world and the temptations of the world and strive to live together in the church as if they have already received their heavenly home. This is not to say that they should be so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good! But it is to say that they are not to be weighted down by the evil of the world in which they live.



Colossae was located 120 miles east of Ephesus in the Lycus River Valley in ancient Phrygia, part of the Roman territory of Asia Minor. It was one of a triad of cities in the area (the other two being Laodicea and Hierapolis), resting at the foot of Mount Cadmus. Its biblical significance lies in



the fact that the book of Colossians was addressed to the church here and that Philemon lived in this city.

Although no excavations have yet taken place, surveys of the site reveal remains on the acropolis including a defensive wall and a pit lined with stones to the west. A theater lies on the eastern side and a necropolis to the north of the Lycus River, a branch of the Meander.

[Col. 1:1-4:18](#) Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup>to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Timothy had been left by Paul at Ephesus to organize the church several years before. When the Ephesian letter was written, Timothy was probably still at Ephesus. Even though the Ephesian letter, as well as this letter, was most likely delivered on the same trip by Tychicus, Timothy is with Paul as he picks up the pen to write this letter.

Like the letter to the Ephesians, Paul is writing in the will of God to the faithful saints at the church in Colossae.

Col. 1:<sup>3</sup>We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, <sup>4</sup>since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; <sup>5</sup>because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup>which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as *it has been doing* in you also since the day you heard *of it* and understood the grace of God in truth; <sup>7</sup>just as you learned *it* from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup>and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

The Colossae church had been mentored by Epaphras. The name “Epaphras” means “lovely. To Paul he was a dear fellow-servant, and a faithful minister of Christ. He was with him at Rome when he wrote to the Colossians. He was a distinguished disciple, and probably the founder of the Colossian church. He is also mentioned in the Epistle to Philemon (Philemon 1:23), where he is called by Paul as his “fellow-prisoner.”

[Philemon 1:23](#) Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you ...

Whatever nickname used to describe Epaphras, he was a Christian preacher who taught the truth to the church in Colossae. He was a native of Colossae whose ministry involved Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Later he was a companion of Paul during the two imprisonments in Rome. Though Epaphras is mentioned in the New Testament only in the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, Paul evidently held this man in high regard.

Col. 1:<sup>9</sup>For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup>so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; <sup>11</sup>strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Paul has not ceased from praying for the people who have come to Christ and are now meeting as the church in Colossae. Notice the things that Paul is praying for:

- 1) That you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding
- 2) So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,
  - a. to please *Him* in all respects,
  - b. bearing fruit in every good work

- c. and increasing in the knowledge of God
- 3) Strengthened with all power,
  - a. according to His glorious might,
  - b. for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience;
  - c. joyously giving thanks to the Father

The truth of the word of God is the key to the knowledge of the will of God. This truth is important because Paul is addressing the problem of Gnosticism in Colossae.

Col. 1:<sup>15</sup> And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation.

In this, Jesus is the very stamp of God the Father. If you have seen Jesus you have seen the Father – both are God.

John 14:9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

The Lord uses both John, Paul, as well as the writer of Hebrews to bolster the understanding that the person of Christ is both the Son of God and the Son of Man, as well as being God Himself in all totality.

Some have tried to argue that Paul regarded Christ as a creature like "all other creation." Through Paul, the Lord is refuting the Gnostics who pictured Christ as one of the "aeons" by placing Him before "all creation" (both angels and men).

#### "Aeon" in Gnosticism

To a Gnostic an "aeon" was a series of radiations from God, who are also known by such names as the One, the Monad, Aion Teleos (The Perfect Aeon), Bythos (Depth or profundity), Proarkhe (Before the Beginning), and the Arkhe (The Beginning). An aeon has an inner being within itself, known as Ennoea (Thought), Charis (Grace), or Sige (Silence). The split perfect being conceives the second aeon, Caen (Power), within itself. Along with the male Caen comes the female æon Akhana (Truth, Love).

Aeons bear a number of similarities to Judaeo-Christian angels, including their roles as servants and radiations from God, and their existence as beings of light. In fact, certain Gnostic Angels, such as Armozel, also happen to be aeons in that philosophy.

The aeons often came in male/female pairs called syzygies, and were frequently numerous (20-30). Two of the most commonly listed æons were Jesus and Sophia. The aeons constitute the pleroma, or the "region of light." The lowest regions of the pleroma are closest to the darkness — that is, the physical world (earth).

When an æon named Sophia radiates without her partner aeon, the result is the Demiurge, or half-creator (Occasionally referred to as Yalda Baoth in Gnostic

texts), a creature that should never have come into existence. This creature does not belong to the pleroma, and to counter this, the One radiates the two savior æons, Christ and the Holy Spirit, to save humanity from the Demiurge. Christ then took the form of the human Jesus, in order to be able to teach humanity how to achieve gnosis (knowledge) and return to the pleroma (the light).

The Gnostic Gospel of Judas, recently found, purchased, held, and translated by the National Geographic Society, also mentions the aeons and speaks of Jesus' teachings of them.

To a Gnostic, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are creatures created to save mankind. In this and other scriptures, Paul is emphasizing that Christ is not only the exact image of God, but He is God, and He was first, before anything else. But He is not a created being ... because He is God, and He created everything.

Col. 1:<sup>16</sup>For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him.

Think of the most wonderful things in the world ... they were created by Christ. Think of the worst things in the world ... they too were created by Christ. Christ created everything that ever existed and will ever exist. In the scripture, the Lord Jesus Christ tells us what is good and what is evil. While He created it all, He chooses what He wants His children to partake in - seen or unseen, powerful or pauper.

Col. 1:<sup>17</sup>And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.

Nothing existed before Christ! All things depend on Him for their existence. Even the Church depends on Christ for He is the head of the church. Not only did He exist before everything else, He was also the first to be risen from the grave to never die again. In doing this, He is still first in everything!

Col. 1:<sup>19</sup>For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, <sup>20</sup>and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

It was by the "good pleasure" of God the Father that God the Son, Jesus Christ would reconcile everything in this world by His shedding away His blood on the cross. This was for the purpose of reconciling all things, not just on earth, but also in heaven to God.

Col. 1:<sup>21</sup>And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, <sup>22</sup>yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- <sup>23</sup>if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved

away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Paul is describing the condition of man before finding the “hope of the gospel.” “Alienated and hostile of mind, engaged in evil deeds,” is a strong description of un-reconciled man, yet it is true. The un-reconciled man is alienated from God. They are hostile to the desires of God and they are engaged in deeds that God does not desire His children to take part in. Why has God provided a way to reconcile man? So that man can be blameless, holy, and above reproach! That is to be the goal of every regenerated person.

**Col. 1:24** Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Christ did not rid the world of suffering for those who belong to God. Christ had suffered on the cross for the world and now it is Paul's time to suffer. For this Paul is rejoicing. When it says “that which is lacking” this does not mean that anything was left undone by Christ. It does however carry the idea of “left overs” meaning that Christ left suffering in this world for the body to endure and Paul was enduring his share in the prison in Rome. But, while in prison and during his suffering, Paul is being used by the Lord to write permanently the WORD OF GOD. Truly his suffering is for the eternal good of Church.

**Col. 1:25** Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the *preaching of* the word of God, **26** *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, **27** to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Paul knew that he was in the center of God's will. He was called by God to deliver the message of the Word of God and that was his purpose in living. The mystery is explained here as it was in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The mystery was that Christ died for the Gentiles as well as the Jews and that the church was the administration through which salvation, the Word of God, worship, praise, and adoration would take place.

**Col. 1:28** And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.

Today the word “admonish” carries the idea of “putting someone in their place.” In Paul's day it just meant to “warn against practices and teachings.” In this letter Paul is warning against practices and teachings of the emerging Gnostic movement. He is not accusing anyone in the Colossae church of being a Gnostic, but he is warning them about the Gnostic teachings. Why warn them? The answer is simple, “so they can be complete in Christ!”

**Col. 1:29** And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

The purpose of Paul's work for the Lord is to admonish the child of God to keep them complete in Christ in every way. But this is not done in Paul's power, but in the power of Christ Himself as He works through Paul. The letter to the Colossian church is not from Paul, but from Christ, delivered through Paul.

Col. 2:<sup>1</sup>For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, <sup>2</sup>that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, <sup>3</sup>in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. <sup>4</sup>I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument. <sup>5</sup>For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

Paul is well aware that the Colossae church is being bombarded with Hellenistic / Gnostic way of thinking about Christianity. Paul wishes that he could be there to help them as well as the Laodicean church. The Laodicean church will, within 30 years, be recorded in the pages of the book of Revelation for their luke-warmness, neither hot nor cold.

Rev. 3:14-22 <sup>14</sup>"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: <sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. <sup>16</sup>So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. <sup>17</sup>'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, <sup>18</sup>I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. <sup>19</sup>Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent. <sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. <sup>21</sup>He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. <sup>22</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' "



## Laodicea

The city is located in the Lycus River Valley together with Hierapolis and Colossae. This valley is a natural route of travel from east to west.

The city was founded by the Seleucid king Antiochus II and named for his wife Laodice about 260 B.C.



### Aqueduct

The water that was piped to Laodicea was rich with calcium which over time would cause the pipes to clog. The engineers designed

the aqueduct with vents covered with stones that could be removed periodically for cleaning.



Jesus' condemnation of the city's church for lukewarmness rebukes not their lack of fervor but their lack of effectiveness.

### Stadium

One of the few stadiums preserved from the ancient world, this one at Laodicea was built by Nicostratus and dedicated to Vespasian in 79 A.D. according to an inscription found here.

The stadium is circular at both ends and was the total complex was 900 feet long. Used primarily for running races, the length of the track was fixed at 600 feet, also known as one stadium.



[Col. 2:6](#) As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, [7](#) having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and overflowing with gratitude.*

Paul uses the illustration of our being rooted in Christ. Just as plants draw nourishment from the soil through their roots, so we draw our life-giving strength from Christ. The more we draw our strength from him, the less we will be fooled by those who falsely claim to have life's answers. If Christ is our strength, we will be free from human regulations.

Col. 2:<sup>8</sup>See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. <sup>9</sup>For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, <sup>10</sup>and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; <sup>11</sup>and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; <sup>12</sup>having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

Paul writes against any philosophy of life based only on human ideas and experiences. Paul was a gifted philosopher, so he is not condemning philosophy. He is condemning teaching that credits humanity, not Christ, with being the answer to life's problems. That approach becomes a false religion. There are many man-made approaches to life's problems that totally disregard God. To resist heresy you must use your mind, keep your eyes on Christ, and study God's Word.

When we know Jesus Christ, we don't need to seek God by means of other religions, cults, or unbiblical philosophies as the Colossians were doing. Christ alone holds the answers to the true meaning of life, because he *is* life. Christ is the unique source of knowledge and power for the Christian life. No Christian needs anything in addition to what Christ has provided to be saved. We are complete in him.

Jewish males were circumcised as a sign of the Jews' covenant with God. With the death of Christ, circumcision was no longer necessary. So now our commitment to God is written on our hearts, not our bodies. Christ sets us free from our evil desires by a spiritual operation, not a bodily one. God removes the old nature and gives us a new nature.

In this passage, circumcision is related to baptism; therefore, baptism in the New Testament is a sign of the covenant, identifying the person with the covenant community. Baptism parallels the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and it also portrays the death and burial of our sinful old way of life followed by resurrection to a new life in Christ. Remembering that our old sinful life is dead and buried with Christ gives us a powerful motive to resist sin. Not wanting the desires of our past to come back to power again, we can consciously choose to treat our desires as if they were dead. Then we can continue to enjoy our wonderful new life with Christ.

Col. 2:<sup>13</sup>And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, <sup>14</sup>having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us *and* which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. <sup>15</sup>When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

Before we believed in Christ, our nature was evil. We disobeyed, rebelled, and ignored God. Even at our best, we did not love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind. The Christian, however, has a new nature. God has crucified the old rebellious nature and replaced it with a new loving nature. The penalty of sin died with Christ on the cross. God has declared us not

guilty, and we need no longer live under sin's power. God does not take us out of the world or make us robots—we will still feel like sinning, and sometimes we will sin. The difference is that before we were saved, we were slaves to our sinful nature; but now we are free to live for Christ.

Col. 2:<sup>16</sup>Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- <sup>17</sup>things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Paul told the Colossian Christians not to let others criticize their diet or their religious ceremonies. Instead of outward observance, believers should focus on faith in Christ alone. Our worship, traditions and ceremonies can help bring us close to God, but we should never criticize fellow Christians whose traditions and ceremonies differ from ours. More important than how we worship is that we worship Christ. Don't let anyone judge you. You are responsible to Christ.

Old Testament laws, holidays, and feasts pointed toward Christ. Paul calls them a "shadow" of the reality that was to come—Christ himself. When Christ came, he dispelled the shadow. If we have Christ, we have what we need to know and please God.

Col. 2:<sup>18</sup>Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, <sup>19</sup>and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

The false teachers were proud of their humility! This false humility brought attention and praise to themselves rather than to God. True humility means seeing ourselves as we really are from God's perspective, and acting accordingly. People today practice false humility when they talk negatively about themselves so that others will think they are spiritual. False humility is self-centered; true humility is God-centered.

The expression "unspiritual mind" means that these people had a self-made religion. The false teachers were trying to deny the significance of the body by saying that it was evil, but their desire for attention from others showed that, in reality, they were obsessed with the physical realm.

The fundamental problem with the false teachers was that they were not connected to Christ, the Head of the body of believers. If they had been joined to him, they could not have taught false doctrine or lived immorally. Anyone who teaches about God without being connected to him by faith should not be trusted.

Col. 2:<sup>20</sup>If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, <sup>21</sup>"Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" <sup>22</sup>(which all *refer to* things destined to perish with the using)-- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

People should be able to see a difference between the way Christians and non-Christians live. Still, we should not expect instant maturity in new Christians. Christian growth is a lifelong process. Although we have a new nature, we don't automatically think all good thoughts and have all pure attitudes when we become new people in Christ. But if we keep listening to God, we will be changing all the time. As you look over the last year, what changes for the better have you seen in your thoughts and attitudes? Change may be slow, but your life will change significantly if you trust God to change you.

[Col. 2:23](#) These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.

We cannot reach up to God by following rules of self-denial, by observing rituals, or by practicing religion. Paul isn't saying all rules are bad. But there is no law or rule that can be kept that will earn salvation. The Good News is that God reaches down to human beings, and He asks for our response. Man-made religions focus on human effort; Christianity focuses on Christ's work. Believers must put aside sinful desires, but doing so is the by-product of our new life in Christ, not the reason for our new life. Our salvation does not depend on our own discipline and rule-keeping, but on the power of Christ's death and resurrection.