

EPISTLE OF COLOSSIANS

Main Theme— Christ is All In All *or* Christ— The head of the Church. Colossians is often referred to as a “twin epistle” to Ephesians since the content is similar in both epistles.

BACKGROUND

In Chapter 1:1 Paul is stated as the author, along with Timothy, and there is much internal evidence (within the epistle) that confirms this. It was written in Rome about AD 60-61, while Paul was imprisoned for the first time, so it is considered one of the four “Prison Epistles.” It was hand delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus during the same time Ephesians and Philemon came to Asia Minor.

The recipients of this epistle are described as the “holy and faithful” brothers in Christ in (the church at) “Colosse.” It was also to be sent to the church at Laodicea (see 2:1 and 4:16). The Colossian church was small and unimpressive even then, located in a small city within the region of Phrygia in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

The city of Colosse was one of the “tri-cities” in the Lycus Valley which is about 100 miles inland from Ephesus. Hierapolis and Laodicea are the other two cities that had congregations. The believers in these churches were mainly Greeks and Phrygians (from Asia Minor), but with a large Jewish population.

The church at Colosse appears to be founded in connection with Paul’s ministry in this region, as seen in Acts 19:10, during the two-year ministry at Ephesus on what is now considered Paul’s third mission. It was probably founded by Epaphras (see 1:7; 4:12), and possibly pastored at that time by Archippus (see 4:17) in the home of Philemon (see 4:9 and Philemon 1, 5-7).

PURPOSE OF THIS EPISTLE

There was one primary purpose for this epistle to be written—refuting what became known as the “Colossian heresy.”

This is seen by the doctrinal content of the epistle and many exhortations related to doctrine in answer to the heresy.

Correction of this Colossian heresy was not so simple. It was not just one specific heresy, but a collection or group of heretical beliefs and practices that were influences in this young church. This becomes clear as each heresy is addressed, especially in Chapter 2. The heresies often overlap or are intertwined. When this influence infiltrates Christian doctrine and practice it is called syncretism.

The most common heresy in all the new churches was the influence of Judaic ceremonialism (Judaism). Basically, an insistence on keeping the Law of Moses, including circumcision. There was also severe asceticism or strict spiritual disciplines believed to make a person more spiritual. Another common element was angel worship or the exalting of angels. These all can be related to Judaism in its various forms.

There was a more insidious form of heresy—a precursor to a common false teaching in the church later called Gnosticism. Gnosticism didn't really develop until about the 2nd or 3rd century, but its roots can be seen here. This was a glorification of so-called spiritual knowledge and worldly or earthly-based wisdom. The general idea being—everything spiritual is good and everything made of matter (earthly elements) is bad. This included the human body. There is much more to this, but it directly attacked both the deity of Christ and His physical resurrection.

All of these false beliefs, teachings, and practices ultimately denied the deity and supremacy of Christ as Lord and God in nature.

This continues to be an earmark of all cults whether pseudo-Christian ones such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormon church, and so on, also other religions, philosophies, and religious cults. There is always an attack on the nature of Jesus being God, and the work of the Lord upon the cross as all-sufficient for salvation—forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life.

The apostle Paul's instruction is simple—the positive presentation of truth to counter heresy. His teaching focuses first on the person and work of Christ. This is presented in contrast to the heresy that confused the Colossian believers.

A solid foundation is laid in the first two chapters. The last two chapters include exhortations for making this doctrine practical—*how to apply* the doctrine and theology in daily life for how to live the Christian life. The epistle begins with personal encouragements and exhortations, and ends with more practical exhortations, personal instructions, and greetings.

OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS

- I. **Intro— 1:1-12** — Greetings / Thanks / Prayer
- II. **Statement of Purpose— 1:13-14** — Being In Christ and living in the Kingdom of God
- III. **Main Teaching— 1:15 – 4:6** — 3 Main Sections
 - A. **1:15–2:5**— Pre-Eminence of Christ and His Work
 - B. **2:6–2:23**— Freedom in Christ— heresy corrected and refuted with the truth
 - C. **3:1–4:6**— Our (believers') Position and Walk in Christ
- IV. **Closing – 4:7-18** — Commendations / Greetings

Key Verses— 1:15-20 / 2:9-10 / 3:1-3,11b

Key Words— in Christ... in Him etc./ fullness / deity / supremacy

IN-DEPTH STUDY GUIDELINE FOR COLOSSIANS

Read the Text of Colossians at least 2-3 times before studying it. Read through the whole text to get the flow and theme of the epistle. Then read through it more carefully while making notes on the text itself or in a notebook.

Follow the outline of Colossians (provided earlier) as a base, then break the text into smaller segments for a more in-depth study. Be clear about what the main idea or subject is for each segment, and where each segment begins and ends. Group the segments within the sections according to the outline given.

Describe IYOW (in your own words) what the main theme is of this epistle. The one given in the outline is very general. How would you explain this theme as a theological truth expressed in 2–5 words IYOW?

Read and review the background of Colossians given in this study guide. For more insights refer to the following references—

“How to Read the Bible book by book”, by G Fee & D Stuart (Zondervan). Also, the Blue Letter Bible is a great resource, as well as the Introductory notes in a good Study Bible. Also, see Halley’s Handbook and possibly a good Bible Dictionary. Avoid commentaries until after you have studied the epistle inductively on your own. Then, I recommend *Enduring Word* by Pastor David Guzik.

Study all of Colossians inductively in your notebook and note the following guidelines and instructions. See also the guidelines for “Epistles and Instructional Text” that will be added later.

Especially look for the following—key words and phrases, repeated words, and transition (connective) words that help you break the text into segments. Along with key phrases, look for their supportive and relative phrases, which will be explained in more detail later.

Follow the logical development of ideas, subjects, and topics. Look for “thematic links” or sub-themes throughout the text. These will be related to the primary theme of the text, but are either extended beyond the primary theme or are more specific themes. You should see these recurring themes woven into the whole text as repeated statements, exhortations, or explanations.

As you come to an understanding of important truths and specific exhortations, make specific, personal and practical applications for your own life. Consider these applications first as they would have applied to believers then. Once you have this in mind, think through how you would carry these out in your daily life.

Especially consider your own life example. Consider how you would disciple someone else in these same things. How could you encourage someone in different circumstances than those of your own life? Remember, it’s not just the *what*, it is the *how*—the specific way you will apply a truth.

COLOSSIAN STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

For vss 3-8—

1. Is it typical for Paul (in his epistles) to “give thanks” for the believers he’s writing to?
 - a. Does he always do this?
2. When does he say “thanks”? What is it in connection to?
 - a. Why is he giving thanks?
3. How are the 2 things mentioned in vs 4 related to each other?
 - a. How did they receive what is spoken of in vs 4?
4. How do *you* define or express the Gospel? (Look ahead in Chap 1 & IYOW)
 - a. What does Paul say about the Gospel – for them, then & us, now? (vs 6)
5. How would Paul know these things about the Colossian believers (since he hadn’t met them)?
 - a. What do you think Paul means by “heard and knew the grace of God in truth”?
6. What is your personal testimony of when & how you came to understand God’s grace?

For vss 9-12—

7. Do you see how vss 3-8 & 9-12 are linked together?
 - a. What is the reason or motivation for Paul to be praying for them?
8. What are 4 key things we can pray about for others & why are they important?
 - a. What are the specific things related to each one (within each verse)
9. How are they linked together – each one within each verse & verse to verse?
 - a. Do you see any kind of progression or development in these?

For vss 13-14—

10. How are the things which are prayed for in vss 9-12 related or connected to vss 13-14?
11. What are 2 key things which make up the main (dual) theme of Colossians?
 - a. Why are these 2 things interwoven and inseparable?
 - b. Can you see the Essential Gospel in vss 13-14? (*EG = He came, died, rose*)
12. How are we “delivered” from the power of darkness? (*Observe carefully before answering*)
 - a. How would you express this IYOW to someone completely ignorant of God & Christianity?
13. How are we “conveyed” into the Kingdom?
 - a. What does this mean in simple, non-Christian words?
14. How can we define or express the idea of “redemption” without using Bible verses or Christian / theological terms?

COLOSSIAN STUDY QUESTIONS

For vss 15-20—

15. What is the very short, but key phrase that ties things together in vss 15-20? (repeated variations)
16. What are the seven (7) important “descriptions” about who the Lord Jesus is (and what He has done) in vss 15-18?
 - a. What is being declared by these “descriptions”, both individually & specifically (IYOW)?
 - b. How are they directly related to the Main Theme (found in vss 13-14)?
17. What are a couple of parallel references (which “echo” the same truths) to this segment?
18. What does the phrase “image of the invisible God” bring to your mind? What “picture”?
 - a. Is Jesus a “created being”? How would you explain “firstborn over all creation”?
19. How does vs 15b correlate to vs 16? What or who, specifically, is created “by Him”?
 - a. What does vs 16 make very clear about who Jesus is?
20. What is vs 17 declaring to us? What do you think it means by “in Him all things consist”?
21. What is vs 18 declaring and making clear?
 - a. Do you see the Essential Gospel (He Came, Died, Rose) in this verse?
22. What is vs 19 declaring?
 - a. How would you explain it (IYOW) to a non-believer without using other Bible texts?
 - b. Why is vs 19 so important, especially in relation to what is declared in vs 20?
23. Do you see how these verses are an “extension” of what we see in vss 13-14? If so, explain IYOW.
24. “Who” is reconciling “what” in what “way”?
 - a. What other verse(s) within this segment is similar to vs 20? (Observe carefully!)

For 1:21–2:5—

25. In what way were we “alienated and enemies”?
 - a. How was this changed? What’s the difference between reconciliation and redemption (IYOW)?
26. For what purpose have we been reconciled?
 - a. Is this different than what is usually seen as the purpose of our reconciliation?
27. What is our responsibility in God’s plan and work of redemption?
 - a. Do we share in the responsibility of our own salvation? If yes or no, explain IYOW...
 - b. In vs 23, is Paul saying the Great Commission has already been fulfilled?
28. What reason does Paul give for explaining and declaring all the truths (theology) we see in Chap 1? How does this reveal his “heart” towards them (Col believers)?
29. What is Paul speaking about in vs 24? Is he saying Jesus didn’t suffer enough on the Cross?
30. What is Paul declaring in vs 25?
 - a. Is he only called to the Gentiles, or even, the only one called to minister in the Gospel to them?
31. What is this “mystery” which has been revealed (IYOW!)?
 - a. Why and how was it “hidden”?
32. In vss 21-24, how is the Gospel described (or expressed) and how is the Great Commission also seen in these verses?
33. What other vss in Chap 1 help us understand what is said in vs 29?
34. What is Paul speaking of in 2:1-3? (IYOW!)
 - a. How is it similar to what has been expressed within Chap 1?

COLOSSIAN STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 2 — [For 2:6-23 (6-10/ 11-15/ 16-19/ 20-23)]

For vss 6-10—

1. What verses in Chap 1 are directly related to Paul's exhortation in 2:6-7?
2. What "illustration" is used as a description of how we are to grow spiritually?
 - a. How would you explain what this illustration means IYOW?
3. How is the warning in vs 8 related to this exhortation? (See other translations if possible)
4. How would you explain vss 9-10 IYOW?
 - a. What verses in Chap 1 are they related to?

For vss 11-15—

5. How is vs 12 helping explain what Paul says in vs 11?
 - a. Why does Paul use this term of "circumcision" to describe our spiritual life in Christ?
6. How do vss 13-15 explain the truth declared in vss 11-12?
7. What was the "handwriting of requirements" that was against us?
 - a. In what way is it "nailed to the Cross"?
8. How have "principalities and powers" been "disarmed"?
 - a. What does this and should this mean to us as believers?

For vss 16-19—

9. What is Paul referring to in vss 16-17?
 - a. What is the "substance" he is speaking of?
10. What reward might we be cheated of?
 - a. What is Paul referring to here? Does it sound familiar to anything in our present age?
11. How is vs 19 related to what Paul has already spoken of in Chap 2?

For vss 20-23—

12. What is Paul saying (as a question) to believers in this final exhortation of Chap 2?
13. What does he say these religious things have no power to do?
 - a. IYOW— What does this mean for your own daily lives?
14. What is the primary point of all this teaching in Chap 2 in relation to the main theme of Colossians?

COLOSSIAN STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 3

For vss 1-5—

1. When vs 1 starts out with “If then...” – is this a question or a statement? (Why either way?)
 - a. How does vs 3 “answer” or relate and explain vs 1?
2. What are the “things above” which we are to seek?
3. How can we explain (IYOW) the truth of vs 3 to an unbeliever (someone who has no Christian background or awareness)?
4. What is Paul declaring to us vs 4? IYOW– What is he specifically speaking of?
5. What “action” are we exhorted to do in vs 5? How do we actually do this?
 - a. Why are these things describe as “members... on the earth”?
6. If vs 3 is true– why are these things still “ours” in this life?!
 - a. How would you explain each of these “members” in current or present-day terms and examples?

For vss 6-11— (these are simply a more extended exhortation of the truths in vss 1-5)

7. What’s another way of saying (IYOW) what is declared in vs 6?
 - a. Who would be included in the “sons of disobedience”?
8. As we read vss 5-7 as a whole thought (especially comparing vss 5 & 7) – what is a fuller explanation (in simple wording) of “walking and living” in these things?
 - a. In other words– what’s the difference between “BC” after we knew the Lord?
9. How do we actually “put-off” all these things?
 - a. In vs 9 it sound like this should already be done– so why do we have to “keep doing it”?
 - b. Can you explain what each of these things are in vss 8-9 (IYOW)?
10. How is this “new man” put on?
 - a. How can we explain how this “putting off” and “putting on “ actually takes place?
11. What is being declared in vs 11 (IYOW)?

For vss 12-17 (vss 12-17 are linked with vss 3:18–4:1 and 3:1-11)

12. (IYOW) How are we as believers described in vs 12?
 - a. How is this directly related within vss 1-11?
13. (IYOW) What are descriptions or “definitions” for the 5 virtues in vs 12?
What are some parallel verses (especially in the Gospels) for the exhortation in vs 13?
 - a. What are some personal examples and situations where this needs to be worked out in your own life? Also, how has it already been so in your own life?
14. Looking at vss 12-14– How can we translate these lofty virtues into “real life”?
 - a. What are some practical, specific ways of “doing” these things?
15. How are these in stark contrast to vss 5, 8 & 9 – as well as to vss 2:16-23?
 - a. Going back to vss 9 & 10 – How can “putting off & putting on” actually work?!
16. There are 3 specific exhortations in vss 15-17 – what specific “areas” are they directed at?
 - a. How are these exhortations to be expressed? How are they to be “see-able” by others? How are they to become “do-able” in real life?
17. If we as believers really “practiced” these exhortations – How do you think it would affect the world (local and global) around us?

COLOSSIAN STUDY QUESTIONS

For 3:18–4:1—

18. Are verses 12-17 related to this next segment of 3:18–4:1? If so, in what way?
19. What is the key phrase in vs 18?
 - a. How would you explain the idea of “submission” here?
 - b. What do you expect of submission?
20. In what area do you think your wife has difficulty in submitting to you?
 - a. Why do you think this is?
21. What is the key phrase in vs 19? (See other translations/ versions)
 - a. What do you think God expects of us in “loving” our wife?
 - b. What do you think your own wife expects of you?
22. What ages of children would be included in vs 20?
 - a. What would “all things” include?
23. What is the key phrase in vs 21? (See other translations/ versions)
 - a. What are things fathers do which “provoke” children? (See other translations/ versions)
24. Are there things which you do or have done which may or have brought discouragement to your children?
 - a. What would you or could you do differently?
25. How does vs 22 relate to our time & culture?
 - a. What doesn’t relate to us now?
26. How does vs 23 directly relate to vs 22?
 - a. Is vs 23 only for “bond-servants”? Why or why not?
27. What are some specific ways in which the exhortation in vs 23 needs to be applied in your own life?
28. What do vss 24-25 declare to us?
 - a. How is this directly applicable to our lives?
29. How can we relate to 4:1 in our time & culture?
 - a. What are specific ways in which this may relate to your personally?
30. Could 3:23-25 also be related to 4:1? If so— how? If not— why not?

COLOSSIAN STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 4

For vss 4:2-6—

1. How is this first exhortation in vss 2-4 similar to how Paul begins this epistle? (Which vss?)
 - a. How would this be an encouragement as well as an exhortation?
2. What specific things is Paul asking prayer for?
 - a. What does he mean about making “the mystery... manifest” (IYOW!)?
3. How can we “walk in wisdom” (IYOW)?
 - a. Who are those “outside”? Why are they “outside”?
4. What do you think he means by “redeeming the time”? (IYOW)
 - a. How would you do this personally?
 - b. What are specific ways you need to do this?
5. IYOW – What 3 things is Paul exhorting us about in vs 6?
 - a. In what ways can we/ you do these 3 things?
6. Which one of the 3 is easiest for you? ...hardest?
 - a. What are specific ways you need to work on the area which is hardest/ most difficult for you?
 - b. How will you do it?!

For vss 7-18—

7. Why do most epistles end with these type of “commendations” & directions?
 - a. Is this valid or needful in the church today? If yes or no, why?
8. Who are these people notes in these final verses? Why would this be valuable or useful?
9. How are vss 8 & 12 similar to the beginning of this epistle?
 - a. In what way can this be applied in the Body today? How?
 - b. Do you think it is even needed nowadays? Why?
10. Where is the “Epistle to Laodicea” found in the NT?
 - a. What does this instruction indicate to us?
11. How is the exhortation for Archippus valid for us today?
 - a. For you personally?
12. Do you know how the Lord desires you to serve Him within His Body & Kingdom?
13. Why do you think Paul would make this “salutation” in his “own hand”? (remember they used “secretaries” to dictate letters to in those days)
 - a. Why would this be an encouragement & valuable to the Colossian believers?
14. How does the Lord make His Word “personal” for you/ us today?
 - a. What are specific ways this is true in your life?