

WELCOME TO COLOSSAE

—CHRISTUS VICTOR WEEK 1—

Colossians (NIV)

I. THE AUTHORSHIP OF COLOSSIANS

- Paul, Apostle and Missionary (1:1)
- From a Jewish Background (Phil 3:4-6; Gal 1:13-14; Acts 22:3)
- From a Greco-Roman Background (Acts 22:3; skilled with Greek language and rhetoric)
- A Former Persecutor of Jesus (Gal 1:13-16, 23; 1 Cor 15:9; Acts 9)
- Written from Prison (Col 4:3, 18; Probably Rome, maybe Ephesus; early 60s AD)
- Somewhat Disputed in Terms of Authenticity
 - 7 Letters of Paul are Considered Undisputed: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.
 - 5 Letters of Paul are often thought to have not been written by him, but by a later follower in Paul's name: Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus.
 - Colossians sits between these two groups, with 60% of scholars denying that it was written by Paul himself.
 - In my opinion Paul wrote Colossians (and in fact all the Pauline letters in the NT). Paul's use of assistants in writing can account for different styles between letters, and different situations at the destinations can account for different content. And in this case, close ties between Colossians and the undisputed letter Philemon points to authenticity (see below). As to the role of assistants impacting style, consider the comments of one NT scholar:

“I would contend, however, that what is often posed as a difference between the genuine Paul and the ‘Paul’ of Colossians is not so much the difference between Paul and Timothy’s interpretation but between the Timothean Paul and the Paul as interpreted and inscribed by others of his associates.

I am left, then, with a rather contrarian dialectical conclusion: I do not think Paul wrote any of the letters because it is far more likely that Paul was behind all of the letters. We have no pure Pauline letters, no ‘undisputed’ or ‘genuine’ Pauline letters, but only letters in which we hear the voice of Paul standing alongside co-workers and (probably) professional scribes. Colossians, then, is Pauline as much as but not more than Galatians and Romans and the Corinthians letters” (Scot McKnight, *Colossians*, 18).

II. THE RECIPIENTS OF COLOSSIANS

- A church planted not by Paul, but by Epaphras (1:7; cf. 2:1; 3:12-13)
- A small, unimportant town.

“Colossae was not an important cultural center such as Alexandria, Athens, or Rome. In fact, Colossae was a rather insignificant city in Roman times, eclipsed by its neighbor Laodicea. Most of the people of Colossae would have made their living by raising sheep, by farming crops, or by wool-dying” (Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 4).

“The ancient city of Colossae (the site of which was discovered in A.D. 1835) was situated in Phrygia on the southern bank of the river Lycus, a southern tributary of the Meander, which was famous for its many curves (hence the English word ‘meander’ meaning ‘wander,’ ‘wind about’), and its fertile valley produced large crops of figs and olives. The site of Colossae is now deserted, but the town of Honaz (formerly a Byzantine fortress) lies three miles to the southeast.

Colossae (usually spelled Κολοσσαί, though later the spelling Κολασσαί occurs) lay on the early main road from Ephesus and Sardis to the Euphrates, and so finds mention in the itineraries of the armies of King Xerxes and Cyrus the Younger which marched along this road. Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C., speaks of Colossae as ‘a great city of Phrygia’ (*History* 7.30.1), while in the following century the chronicler Xenophon described it as ‘a populous city, wealthy and large’ (*Anabasis* 1.2.6). Its commercial significance was due to its wool industry. The wool was gathered from sheep which grazed on the slopes of the Lycus valley, and dyed a dark red color (Strabo, *Geography* 12.8.16) that was generally known as ‘Colossian’ (Latin *colossinus*: Pliny, *History* 21.51).

Later the city declined considerably in importance, so that in Roman times, two generations before Paul, Strabo speaks of it only as a ‘small town’ (*Geography* 12.8.13, πόλισμα). Colossae had been surpassed by Laodicea, ten miles to the west, and Hierapolis, twelve miles to the northwest, both in the same Lycus valley. These were mentioned by the apostle as places where Christians were to be found in close connection with those at Colossae (Col 2:1; 4:13, 15, 16). According to Strabo, Laodicea had developed into a flourishing city during the first century B.C. (12.8.16). Founded by Antiochus II (261–246 B.C.) who named it after his wife, Laodice, it had become—under Roman rule—the seat of a judicial district which was part of the province of Asia (Pliny, *History* 5.105). Not far away on the north side of the valley Hierapolis was also important in NT times, particularly because it was famous for its healing springs (Strabo, *Geography* 12.8.16).

Parts of the Lycus valley, especially Laodicea, were destroyed by earthquake in A.D. 60–61, according to Tacitus (*Annals* 14.27.1). Although Colossae is not mentioned it was probably damaged on the same occasion Strabo expressly called the whole region a center of repeated earthquakes (*Geography* 12.8.16), and later Orosius commented that ‘in Asia three cities, Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae, have fallen by earthquakes’ (*Historiae ad paganos* 7.7.12. It is not certain, however, whether this report refers to the same event which Tacitus records; Eusebius, *Chronicle* 215, dates this destruction in the ninth or tenth year of Nero).

Laodicea was soon restored without any outside assistance from Nero or the Romans, but Colossae never regained its place of prominence. If it was not destroyed in A.D. 60–61 then it may have suffered further seismic damage and was not rebuilt. There is some inscriptional and numismatic evidence that Colossae continued as a Roman city with its officials well into the Christian centuries The present-day site is uninhabited and not yet excavated

So by the time Paul wrote to the Christians living at Colossae the commercial and social importance of the town was already on the wane. What effect this might have had on the townspeople, or the Christians among them, we do not know. Last century Lightfoot (16) commented: ‘Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St Paul is addressed’—and this may well be true’ (O’Brien, *Colossians*, xxvi-xxvii).

III. THE REASON FOR WRITING COLOSSIANS

- False teachers were threatening the congregation with a mix of Jewish-Greek mysticism and traditionalism which offered supernatural experiences to help with people's problems. They probably thought Christ was good, but not good enough.
- One scholar imaginatively pens a letter from the opponents, with words distinctive to Colossians highlighted (suggesting emphases of the opponents).

Dear Colossians:

We know you are experiencing **hardships**: no doubt you are aware that there are evil **spirits** and **powers** that have **authority** over our mortal world. These powers prey on the weakness of human **bodies** and **flesh**. Thus our world is fraught with cosmic chaos. We can offer, though, **knowledge, wisdom, and teachings (traditions)** that can protect you from these malevolent forces. By controlling, combating, and **disciplining** your own frail **body**, you can resist these **powers**. **Circumcision** and strict **ritual** Torah obedience are particularly effective in counteracting these hostile spirits. Once you have **submitted** yourself to such **disciplines** of the **body**, you will gain access to the celestial world—receiving divine **wisdom, visions,** and provisions to fight against the weakness of the flesh that the evil powers use against you. We can offer you the proper route to **spiritual fullness and perfection**. (Grupta, *Colossians*, 18)

- These perspectives might seem foreign to us, because here in the West we too-often ignore and disbelieve the reality of spiritual entities and bondage. One NT scholar helpfully writes:

“Paul insists on the supremacy of Christ over all the supernatural forces the Colossians were treating with such respect. Some of us may miss part of the relevance of what he is saying because we do not believe in those forces in the way the Colossians did. But with rising occultism in the West, our skepticism is being mocked; and in any case, it has often been pointed out that in modern times there is a widespread belief that we are the creatures of our heredity and our environment and that in the grip of such powers we can never be really free. It is part of the message of Colossians that in Christ we can overcome anything. The cross means a disarming of all the powers opposed to God's purpose (2:15), and this remains an important part of the Christian way” (Carson and Moo, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 529).

IV. THE RELATION OF COLOSSIANS TO EPHESIANS AND PHILEMON

- Ephesians and Colossians are very similar

Compare, for example: Eph 1:1-2//Col 1:1-2; Eph 3:2//Col 1:25; Eph 3:9//Col 1:26; and especially: Eph 6:21-22//Col 4:7-8. Some kind of relationship clearly exists between these letters.

- The “supporting actors” behind the scenes in both Colossians and Philemon are mostly the same.

In Philemon, ten people other than Paul are mentioned, seven with Paul in prison, and three at the destination of Philemon.

In Colossians eight of these same people are mentioned—omitting only Onesimus and Philemon's wife Apphia. Clearly some kind of similar location and time lies behind both letters.

- See NT scholar Dan Wallace's historical reconstruction of the situation: bible.org/seriespage/12-colossians-introduction-argument-outline



V. SOME KEY THEMES OF COLOSSIANS

- High Christology (Col 1:15-20; 2:9; 3:11)
Meaning: Jesus is fully divine and supreme over all.
- The Apocalyptic Gospel of Jesus (1:18-20; 3:4)
Meaning: In Christ, God is intervening to restore the whole Cosmos.
- *Christus Victor* over the Powers (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15)
Meaning: Jesus has saved us by defeating our enemy, Satan, and his demons.
- “Already-but-not-yet” Eschatology and Ethics (1:13, 27; 2:12, 20; 3:1-11)
Meaning: in Christ the age of restoration, fulfillment, and salvation has come, yet we await the final implementation of this fulfillment. So we are called to “live out what we are” and to “become what we are” based on our position and identity in Christ.
- The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ over Competitors (2:8-10, 16, 18-19, 20-21)
Meaning: Christ is superior to every compromise believers are tempted to make with culture, philosophies, traditions, or religious alternatives. Christ must be sought above all these things!

VI. BONUS: A ONE-SENTENCE (!) SUMMARY OF PAUL’S THEOLOGY

“Paul preached, and then explained in various pastoral, community-forming letters, a narrative, apocalyptic, theopolitical gospel of God’s shocking faithfulness and grace, (1) in continuity with the story of Israel and (2) in distinction to the imperial gospel of Rome (and analogous powers), that was centered on God’s crucified and exalted Messiah Jesus, whose incarnation, life, and death by crucifixion were validated and vindicated by God in his resurrection and exaltation as Lord, which inaugurated the new age or new creation, in which all members of this diverse but consistently covenantally dysfunctional human race who respond in self-abandoning and self-committing faith thereby participate in Christ’s death and resurrection and are (1) justified, or restored to right covenant relations with God and with others, and adopted into God’s family; (2) incorporated into a particular manifestation of Christ the Lord’s body on earth, the church, which is an alternative community to the status-quo human communities committed to and governed by Caesar (and analogous rulers) and by values contrary to the gospel; and (3) infused both individually and corporately by the Spirit of God’s Son so that they may lead “bifocal” lives, focused both back on Christ’s first coming and ahead to his second, consisting of Christlike, cruciform (1) faith(fulness) and (2) hope toward God and (3) love toward both neighbors and enemies (a love marked by peaceableness and hospitality), thereby bearing witness in word and deed to the one true God and the Lordship of Christ, and participating by the power of the Holy Spirit in God’s mission of reconciliation and restorative justice in Christ, even at the risk of suffering and death, all in joyful anticipation of (1) the return of Christ, (2) the resurrection of the dead to eternal life, and (3) the renewal of the entire creation” (Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 183).

THE BOTTOM LINE

(Re) _____ to _____ above _____

...by recognizing the _____ and the _____, as seen in Colossians.

...by _____ the _____ Colossians in _____ at least once this week.

...by spending time this week studying _____ and _____ referenced.