

Lesson 1
INTRODUCTION
Colossians 1:1-2

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Significance of Colossians.

Colosse was surely one of the most insignificant cities in the province of Asia, the church of Colosse was quite small, and the Letter to the Colossians was one of the shortest letters in the New Testament. But this little letter has an importance and value out of proportion to its size. This epistle more than anywhere in the Bible, has the most significant and potent statements on the person and work of Christ. This is the Christological epistle of the Bible. As to the universe, Christ is creator and Sustainer. As to the Church, Christ is the Head. As to the Christian, Christ is Lord. No New Testament book states the deity of Christ more clearly. In 1:15, it says, "He is the image of the invisible God." In 2:9, it says, "For in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form."

Relevance of Colossians.

Many people say, "Is the Bible relevant to the problems of the modern world? Can it speak to us in an age of cults, cloning and nuclear energy?" Our modern technological society has produced depersonalization - man is little more than a machine - but the Book of Colossians is relevant to make us see we are persons, created in the image of God. In an age of pragmatism, when people no longer ask, "Is it true but does it work?" Colossians speaks. In an age of science when we are delving into the areas of test tube babies and genetic engineering, Colossians speaks. In an age of immorality, infidelity, divorce, homosexuality and AIDS, Colossians speaks. In an age in which existence not extinction frightens people, Colossians speaks. Colossians is as contemporary as the Iran Contra scandal because it deals with eternal truths which never change.

THEME OF COLOSSIANS

Primary Theme: Christ, the pre-eminent, supreme One, the only and all sufficient Savior is the primary theme of Colossians. ". . .*so that in everything he might have the supremacy (be pre-eminent)*" (1:18).

Secondary Theme

The Christian, because he is in organic and mystical union with Jesus Christ, shares the very fullness of deity: "*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ*" (2:9-10).

His life is now hidden with Christ in God: ***“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”*** (3:3)

He is linked up with Christ ***“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom, and knowledge . . . that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”*** (2:2b-3).

The result of all this is that Christ is in the Christian, the hope of glory: ***“To them God had chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*** (1:27).

In the Book of Galatians, Christians are free in Christ. In Ephesians Christians are alive in Christ. In Philippians, Christians are happy in Christ. In Colossians Christians are complete in Christ.

The Book of Colossians teaches us that the Christian life is not a creed nor a system of doctrine nor a certain kind of worship, but Christianity is Christ. It is Christ's very own life in us.

THE CITY OF COLOSSE

In the Roman province of Asia (modern western Turkey) about 100 miles from Ephesus, the capitol of the province, there were three cities in the valley of the River Lycus - Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colosse (all three are mentioned in this book). Originally they had been Phrygian cities. The Phrygians were very religious people, steeped in paganism, believing they were the original people on earth. There were very few atheists among them but polytheism was the religion of the day. The gods and goddesses of Cybele, Isis, Zeus, Serapis, Demeter, Artemis and a thousand others were worshipped there.

Early in its history, Colosse was a very important city. it was located right on a fault and many earthquakes and volcanic activity took place there. Thermal and mineral springs abounded and the springs carried great quantities of lime matter, making the water chalky and murky white. This chalky substance formed beautiful natural formations on the mountain sides - fantastic cascades and archways could be seen everywhere. The volcanic ash made for very fertile land which was used to graze sheep. It was a great center for the wool industry and the chalky waters made dyeing materials extremely profitable. There was even a dye called “Colosse purple.” Early in its history, Colosse was built right on the major trade routes between East and West, so that in Greek literature it is called “A great city of Phrygia” and a “populous city, wealthy and large.” But when the province of Asia was taken over by Rome, the road system changed for sane reason (probably for military purposes). and the population of Colosse began to diminish. Eventually both Laodicea and Hierapolis surpassed it in population, position and wealth. Later Roman writers referred to it as “a small town” and “an insignificant market town.” By 400 AD Colosse no longer existed as a city and around 700 AD the town was completely deserted. Its sight today lies in ruins and cannot be identified for sure. The people who populated this area at the time the Book of Colossians was written were original Phrygians who were very mystically

involved in heathen religion, the Greeks who were very intellectually involved with their pagan gods and Jews who were committed to the ways and laws of Moses, being very legalistic in their approach to their monotheistic religion. Obviously Colosse would become a breeding ground for the mixing of all kinds of religions.

THE CHURCH AT COLOSSE

The Church of Colosse must have been founded around 56 AD. Apparently the church was not directly founded by Paul. They had never met Paul personally: ***“I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally”*** (2:1). However, Paul indirectly founded the church. The Apostle Paul spent at least two years in the city of Ephesus, which was about 100 miles from Colosse, on his second missionary journey. Undoubtedly men from Colosse such as Epaphras and Archippus went to Ephesus where they heard Paul preach.

They were converted and went back to Colosse to tell the good news of Christ. Perhaps the Colossian church was used to evangelize Laodicea and Hierapolis. It is fairly certain that Epaphras became the pastor-teacher at the Church of Colosse: ***“You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf. . .”*** (1:7). We do know the gospel of Christ had a wide impact on the whole province of Asia because in Acts 19:10 it says, ***“. . . all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”***

Notice how the gospel spread and how churches were founded without all the modern day techniques and methods. The good news of Christ spread like wild fire by person to person. This is still the quickest and most efficient method of reaching people for Christ.

Some scholars think the Church of Colosse was a small but dynamic group of Christians who probably met in the house of Philemon, a wealthy sheep rancher. Bishop Lightfoot says, “Without a doubt Colosse was the least important church of any that the Apostle Paul addressed.”

This shows Paul’s concern for all the churches not just the big and powerful ones. It also indicates that one does not have to be a mega-church to get the attention of God or men. Epaphras was a genuine pastor. He traveled over 1000 miles to Rome (which took months) where Paul was imprisoned to give him news of the spiritual condition of the Church of Colosse. A heresy had arisen in the church which Epaphras could not handle so he went to the only man he knew could help him - the Apostle Paul.

Epaphras brought the news of this false teaching which had invaded the Colossian Church to Paul who was under house arrest in Rome. Apparently, the vast majority of Christians at Colosse were standing true but some were being affected by this false teaching. The date of the writing of this epistle was around 62 AD. The letter to the Colossians was Paul’s attempt to confront this false teaching in Colosse and to thwart the false teachers in that church who were seeking to delude the saints and lead them astray.

The vast majority of the people in the church were Gentiles—Phrygians that were mystical and Greeks that were intellectuals. There must have been a few Jews who had legalistic tendencies. All of the people in the Church of Colosse were relatively young Christians and therefore very susceptible to false teaching.

Tychicus was the bearer of this letter to the Colossians: ***“Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.”*** (4:7,8). This epistle was also read to the Church at Laodicea because the same heresy had entered that church: ***“After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.”*** (4:16)

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

It is impossible to understand the Book of Colossians without having a grasp of the heresy which was infecting that church. Because Paul is refuting this heresy, there are many obscure allusions to this false teaching, making it difficult for the average reader to understand and appreciate. This is why Colossians is one of the neglected books of the New Testament. What Paul does is take these theological terms of the heretics and give them Christian meaning.

This false teaching in the Church of Colosse was a Christian heresy. It was a syncretism (combining, mixing) of various religions with Christianity. Actually it was a combination of Oriental theosophy, Greek philosophy, Jewish legalism with a Christian flavor. What made it so dangerous was that it did not deny Christ, but it did dethrone Him. It gave Christ a place but not the supreme place. For sure, it was a doctrine of God and salvation which cast a cloud over the glory of Jesus Christ.

The failure of the Colossians was at this point, “not holding fast the Lord.” The place that Christ holds in any religious teaching determines whether it is true or false. Every modern cult can be determined by the question, “What think ye of Christ?” Cults are based on the same old heresies and misrepresent the truth concerning Christ and His person and work.

What do we know for sure about the Colossian heresy? It is impossible to pin point the exact nature of the heresy or even give it a name.

It was a philosophy: ***“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy . . .”*** (2:8). Paul calls it “hollow and deceptive”.

It involved the worship of angels: ***“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize”*** (2:18). They ranked angels by importance and they were seen as intermediaries to God. These supernatural angelic powers played a major role in the creation of the universe.

As a result of this, Christ was relegated to a relatively minor place for He was just one of many intermediaries.

It had a well defined astrological element in it: ***“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”*** (2:8). The words “basic principles” can be translated “elemental spirits of the world”, referring primarily to the spirits of the stars and planets. The ancient world was dominated in thought by the influence of the stars, and even the greatest and wisest men would not act without consulting them. It was believed that all were in the grip of iron fatalism settled by the stars. All of this, of course, was related to the occult.

The Colossian heresy was saying man needed something more than Christ to deliver them from subjection to the elemental spirits.

It made much of the power of demonic spirits: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (2:15). There are frequent references to “powers and authorities” which are Paul’s terms for the spirit world. The ancient world lived in a demon haunted universe.

The Colossian heresy said something more than Christ was needed to defeat the power of Satan.

It was ascetic: “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules” ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” (2:20-23). The Colossian heresy taught the body was evil and must be treated as an enemy. All the bodily needs and desires must be kept to a minimum. All bodily pleasures must be denied.

It was ritualistic: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (2:16, 17). It places emphasis upon circumcision, dietary laws, observance of days and so on. The heretics taught that these things had to be added to the work of Christ for one to be saved.

It had an anti-nomian (against law) streak in it: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.” (3:5-8). Some advocates of this heresy felt it was hopeless to curb the desires of the body so their philosophy was “if it feels good

do it!” They felt only the spirit in man was important and the body was to be indulged with all of its desires.

It involved a spiritual and intellectual snobbery: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.” (1:28). The heretics limited the gospel to the chosen few who knew their terminology and experienced their mystical way of life. This developed into an intellectual and spiritual aristocracy.

We know this heresy attacked the total adequacy of Christ and His unique supremacy. It denied that Christ was the Creator of the universe. And more importantly, it ridiculed the fact that Jesus Christ was true deity, God came in the flesh.

What can we assume about this heresy? Many scholars believe the Colossian heresy has the incipient (beginning) seeds of Gnosticism which was rampant in the second century. Gnostics comes from the Greek word gnosis which means “knowledge. Gnostics asserted the supremacy of knowledge, and taught that salvation is not attained through faith in Christ alone but through knowledge of their philosophical system. This knowledge was an occult knowledge, brought on by the superstitions of astrology and magic. It was esoteric (mystical, cultic) knowledge available only to those initiated into the mysteries of the Gnostic system. There were two serious errors in the Gnostic system:

A Theological Error. Gnostics assumed all matter was evil and that God was a totally good spirit. Spirit and matter could not co-exist. They founded a doctrine of the creation of the world whereby a totally good, spiritual God could have contact with material creation which is evil. They said that from God, the ultimate Spirit, issued or evolved certain series of emanations, aeons or demiurges who were lesser beings than God. As these emanations continued to evolve from one another, they were less spirit and more material and evil. Each emanation retained less of God’s original spiritual nature. Finally, after thousands of emanations, there is one emanation who is material enough and evil enough to create the world. Creation, therefore, was attributed to one of these lesser emanations. Others thought there was an evolution or angelic beings rather than aeons or emanations.

Gnosticism got mixed up with Christianity and made Christ, a created being, who was either angelic in nature or ghostlike, and was somewhere on this angelic scale, the creator of the world.

This is why Paul says in Colossians 1:16: “For by Him (Christ) all things were created . . .”

A Practical Error. The second thing that resulted from Gnosticism was a practical error about life. Their conclusion that all matter is evil brought a belief that the body with all of its functions and desires is evil. This resulted in asceticism, which denied the body of everything except the basic functions of life. The only way to get away from evil is to withdraw from those things which cause evil which for them was everything. Gnosticism also resulted in licentiousness or anti-nomianism (against law), for many concluded that if

the body is evil all that is important is the spiritual soul. So they fed the body all kinds of sensual evil, believing that the soul alone was to be nurtured.

The Gnostic error can be seen in the beginning stages in the heresy in Colosse. It can also be seen today in such cults as Hara-Krishna and Hugh Hefner's "Playboy Magazine."

CONCLUSION

If one reads the Book of Colossians, he realizes Paul's answer to every major problem in life is summed up in one word: Christ! This may seem simplistic but Christ is the answer. If Paul were here today writing a letter to the Church of Orlando, he would say the answer to our social and moral problems is not education, not law, not arms agreements, not energy conservation, not science, not medical advancement, not equality of the sexes, not better relations between management and labor, not even religion—but Christ! Christ as He is Lord of one's life and as He is related to every aspect of life and society.

If Paul were here today, he would say, "There is no meaning to life, no purpose to life, no significance for anyone or anything apart from Christ. For Paul, as for us, life is tied up in one person, Christ, the image of the invisible God all the fullness of Deity lives, the One who created all things in heaven and earth.

My friends, when you came to know Christ, when you are rightly related to Him, all other things will fall into proper perspective. St. Augustine put it well when he said, "Christ is not valued at all unless He is valued above all."

