

SET YOUR HEART ON THINGS ABOVE

This four-week study of the Letter to the Colossians is created primarily for people who have little or no current knowledge of the Bible, or this letter in particular.

TIME AND PLACE OF WRITING

Colossians was written by Paul from prison. This is generally agreed to place the time and place of writing as Paul's imprisonment in Rome in 60 A.D.

COLOSSE

Colosse was a major city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) for a few centuries before Paul arrived to preach. The city was on an important east-west trade route between Ephesus on the Aegean Sea and the Euphrates River. However, the town had lessened in importance by Paul's time. The nearby towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis were much more important. Colosse was evangelized by Epaphras, a disciple of Paul's who left Ephesus to begin a church in this town to the east.

PURPOSE OF THE LETTER

Paul writes to this church to correct some heretical teachings. He never specifically describes the heresy and so we have to infer it from his correctives. Some of the teachings he counters include a reliance on human wisdom (2:4,8) strict ceremonial rules (2:11,26-27), and angel worship (2:18). They seem to come from an extreme form of Judaism making its way into Christianity as well as some teaching secret knowledge from Jesus which fits with later Gnosticism (which is from "gnosis" meaning "wisdom" as Gnostics offered a secret teaching known only to its adherents).

Paul refutes the heresy by teaching a more exalted view of Jesus as the Christ. He teaches of Jesus in terms of the image of the invisible God, the Creator (1:16), and the pre-existent sustainer of all things (1:15-17). He contrasts Jesus with the hollowness of relying on human teaching and philosophy alone.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN YOUR READING

Remember that this is a letter and so it was first written for a given group of people to receive in response to false teaching. Paul is responding to a given situation. So, for example, when Paul writes in 2:16, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival" this teaches us that Paul is responding to a situation in which some are criticized for their behavior at certain festivals. He then goes on to say that the festivals are a shadow of the things to come and that the reality is found in Christ. As you read consider how Paul's response to the false teaching in Colosse is applicable to situations today. One example is that some would teach that Christians should not observe Christmas as its practices include a mix of pagan rituals. A person might point to the pagan background of the Christmas tree as cause to avoid the trappings of Christmas. How might Paul's advice concerning people judging you about the way you keep festivals apply in this new setting as you realize that our Christmas celebrations are a shadow of what is to come?

Paul also gives rules for holy living and rules for households. In what way do those rules reflect the time and in what way are the rules eternal? For example, Paul writes that slaves are to obey their earthly masters. Does this, as some taught in previous centuries, give a biblical basis for slavery? Or does this show how Christians are to act within the setting in which they find themselves? Consider as you read, both what the text is saying and how it applies to our current cultural setting.



PLAN FOR STUDY

Reading the text ahead of the class will be helpful. Here is what the course will cover:

Week	Passage
1	Colossians 1
2	Colossians 2
3	Colossians 3
4	Colossians 4

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THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS