

Introduction to Colossians

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Paul: The Man and His Ministry

- Who was the Apostle Paul?

In his own words: Galatians 1:11-24 - "For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, 'He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me."

- **Filling out the story:** Acts 7-9 detail the beginning of Paul's (who was originally called Saul) Ministry:
 1. Persecutor of the church, present at the stoning of Stephen.
 2. Acts 8:3 "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."
 3. Jesus speaks to Saul on the Damascus road in Acts 9 (while he was on his way to arrest the Christians there). Saul is blinded, God sends Ananias to lay his hands on Saul and restore his sight.
 4. Saul becomes a zealous preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Imagine the weight of a conversion like this—compare it to someone like an Islamic terrorist suddenly having a change of heart and becoming pro-democracy, pro-capitalism, pro-Western ideology, etc. Wouldn't we be a bit skeptical at first?
- Paul's radical conversion and transformation should give us hope for those we know who seem, in our estimation, impossibly beyond the hope of salvation. Some of us may even consider ourselves to be in this category.
- Consider Paul's own words: **1 Timothy 1:12-17** - "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal

life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

- Important principle demonstrated in Paul’s amazing conversion experience: God’s mercy and patience is displayed through the regeneration of sinners – it’s an example and a witness for others and it ultimately brings God glory.
- The rest of Paul’s ministry: missionary journeys throughout the known world – Asia Minor, Macedonia, etc.
- He planted churches, preached, invested in younger pastors like Timothy and Titus, was imprisoned, beaten, tortured, etc.
- In the teaching of Paul, we gain a full understanding of how we are to approach suffering.

Philippians 4:12-13 - “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

2 Corinthians 11:24-33 - “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands [refers to story after Paul’s conversion in Acts 9]”.

Later in the next chapter: **2 Corinthians 12:9-10** - “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

- Paul was a man transformed by God’s grace, through a radical encounter with the Lord Jesus, who lived a life of selfless ministry, toiling for the sake of the gospel, pouring his heart out on behalf of the churches of the day, longing for the message of Jesus to take root in the lives of people, passionate about promoting and protecting the spiritual health of believers.

The City of Colossae

- Colossae was located in a region called Phrygia or Asia Minor (what is now Turkey) close to the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. In Paul’s day, it was under Roman rule.
- More specifically, it was located in the Lycus Valley on the Lycus River which flows into a larger river which eventually empties into the Mediterranean Sea.
- It was known for its production of dyed wool garments.

- By Paul's day, Colossae had really been overshadowed by the other towns close to it. Laodicea was located on an important roadway junction, so it enjoyed much more importance in terms of trade and commerce. Hierapolis was close to lots of hot springs, so it became famous for its spas and bath houses. People would travel there to bathe in the hot waters, which were thought to have healing powers.
- So, by Paul's time, Colossae was really a small, rather insignificant town. How amazing then, that this church in this small little town is addressed by Paul in such an important letter. This wasn't the most popular, influential city, it wasn't where the movers and shakers were, and yet Paul cared about them.

Introduction to the Letter

- Colossians was written by Paul while he was in prison (most likely in Rome) and also very likely at the same time he wrote Ephesians and Philemon.
 - We know from evidence within the letter (2:1) that Paul was not the founder of the church at Colossae—it was apparently founded by Epaphras, who Paul calls "a faithful minister on our behalf". How amazing it is that Paul writes with such passion for a group of people he has not even met face to face?
 - Much of the letter is devoted to refuting some sort of false teaching that was going on at the time. Scholars call it the "Colossian Heresy." We don't know for sure the exact details of this false teaching, but it seems to be some sort of melding of Christianity and Judaism with mysticism.
- 2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."
- The Colossian heresy apparently also had something to do with asceticism (the doctrine that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, etc.). So, in other words, if you deny yourself certain things, not eating certain foods or drinking certain drinks, or avoiding certain activities, that in some way this would draw you closer to God.
 - The problem with all this is that these false teachings undermined the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ as our savior. Paul is essentially saying that when we attempt to supplement Christ with other things, Christianity and x, y, or z, we have robbed Christ of his rightful supremacy as our savior.
 - This is certainly a relevant point in our day in age. Think about the constant onslaught of new self-help techniques, Oprah's newest guru, etc. that come down the line. These are all things that might not even openly contest Christ, but supposedly supplementing Christ they may as well be negating his all-sufficiency.
 - In response to this, Paul gives us some of the most amazing "Christological" passages in the NT. As we study Colossians over these next few weeks, be on the lookout for those passages that shed light on who Christ is.
 - Colossians is not only a treatise that tells us the truth about Jesus Christ, but it is also a letter concerned with Christian living. We see this throughout the latter half of the letter.
 - Relation to the letter to Philemon: both Colossians and Philemon were delivered by Tychicus. In Colossians, Paul tells the Colossians that with Tychicus he is also sending Onesimus. The letter to Philemon is a letter concerning the man Onesimus. It is very likely that both letters were written and sent at the same time. Colossians to the whole church, and Philemon to a specific family within that church. Now Onesimus was, from what we can gather, a runaway

slave whose master was at one time Philemon. At some point, Onesimus had in his running away, met up with Paul, and possibly had himself been converted and transformed by the gospel. In his letter, Paul writes an amazingly heartfelt plea to Philemon to receive Onesimus back no longer as a slave but as a brother. I would encourage you to read it along with our study of Colossians.

- When you take these two letters together, you can really see Paul's pastoral heart. His desire is to see peace, unity, forgiveness, reign in the relationships of Christian brothers and sisters.