

What's the Point....of Colossians?

Mark Garner

Colossians was written in part to address some erroneous teachings that had confused the believers in Colossae. Paul shows that their specific problems also represent some common struggles that we all have in understanding the real meaning of the good news of Jesus. Moreover, he focuses primarily on explaining the significant truths of the message of Jesus, so the epistle can help all of us better understand the basis of our relationship with God.

Background & Main Themes

Colossians is one of several letters Paul wrote from prison in Rome (approximately AD 61-63). Paul had not been to Colossae; another believer, Epaphras (see 1:7), had taught about Jesus there. Epaphras could well have heard Paul during the apostle's extended stay in Ephesus, which had led to the message of Jesus also spreading throughout neighboring regions. Earlier, Colossae had been on what was once the main highway east out of Ephesus, and for a time was one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the area (the Lycus River valley, today part of western Turkey). But by the 1st century AD, the city had long since shrunk and lost its importance; it was no longer on a main road, and it was now overshadowed by Laodicea and Hierapolis.

The Colossians had been influenced by a number of misleading teachings, ranging from speculative theology to obsessive rule-following, from a mixture of outside influences. The specifics are somewhat vague, and indeed they no longer matter, because instead of dwelling on these details the epistle emphasizes key truths including grace, the forgiveness of sins, and the significance of the cross. Thus the letter is particularly helpful in guiding us to develop a new, deeper perspective.

Set Your Hearts On Things Above (Overview Of Colossians)

Paul opens by reminding the Colossians of the basic eternal truths of Jesus' message, and of the many spiritual blessings they bring us (Colossians 1). Amongst many other blessings, Jesus has reconciled us with God, he has brought us out of this world's darkness into his everlasting light, and he helps us learn how to see things in ways that transcend this world's teachings and reasoning. Moreover, he discusses how in Jesus all things hold together.

Next the apostle explains that through Jesus alone are found all the true treasures of wisdom and understanding (Colossians 2), and he compares them with this world's teachings. All of the "fine-sounding" teachings of this world's experts and authorities lead to false hopes and empty promises, while Jesus' promises lead to redemption, salvation, and eternal life. Paul vividly describes how Jesus has made a "public spectacle" of this world's ways.

Then, the apostle appeals us to look beyond this world's temporary circumstances and appearances, and to set our hearts on unseen things (Colossians 3). The letter then discusses some of the implications of this. Then, after asking us to be devoted to prayer, the epistle concludes with some personal thoughts (Colossians 4). The focus of Colossians is for us to put our faith in the message of Jesus, and to listen to God's words instead of all of this world's loud voices, so that instead of this world's false hopes we may have the enduring peace and hope that come through Jesus.

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Caleb Dillinger

Colossians is one of the most densely Christological letters of the New Testament. While Paul writes substantially about Christ in most of his letters, Colossians puts particular emphasis and priority on Christ. Just four chapters long, this prison epistle (letter written while Paul was under arrest after the end of the events in the book of Acts) remains vital for our understanding of Jesus in his relationship to the Father and role in creation and with the church. It also is an incredibly concise presentation of the Christian life.

Jesus paired with the title “Christ” (meaning the anointed one, or Messiah) occurs 5 times in this letter, while there are no uses of just “Jesus” as a name, and still more uses of the term “Lord” and “Christ” as individual terms for Jesus. While it is common today to think of Jesus as our Lord or savior, Colossians helpfully reminds us of the prophetic role Jesus played as the Messiah/Christ/Anointed one, part of God’s plan. Colossians 1 in particular helps Christians see Christ through his role in redeeming Christians and having dominion over creation and the church. Christ is our brother, as the Scriptures teach, but we should never forget his critical role as Christ/Messiah and how his life, death, and resurrection gifted us redemption and inheritance.

Colossians shares similarities with other writings of Paul about living as a Christian, but concisely. Colossians 2 and 3 explain how because of Christ we live differently than the world and the way we used to live before Christ. We have significant freedom because of Christ, but we also use that freedom for good, not for selfish or sinful purposes. Paul rebukes ascetism (depriving yourself) and worship of angels because things like that are not necessary because Christ is fully sufficient. We are raised as new creations with Christ and that prompts us to put to death the sin of the flesh and walk (live) according to the Spirit.

Paul wraps up his letter with a reflection on relationships, generically like household codes (wives, husbands, children, parents, masters) as well as personal relationships (nine named people) and general church relationships (like with a sister church, like Laodicea, and with non-Christians). As you navigate how to live faithfully in this modern world, Paul’s teaching on grace and love and patience and how we watch our words and actions remains incredibly important.

The point of reading Colossians today is to better understand Jesus as the Christ, how to live as a Christian in the world, and how to hold healthy relationships.