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and Philemon*

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FOUNDERS STUDY GUIDE COMMENTARY

*Colossians
and Philemon*

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Publisher's Introduction

Colossians and Philemon are books that have remarkable instruction for twenty-first century churches. The problems that the Apostle Paul addressed in his first-century context are still with us today, and the inspired remedies are just as authoritative and effective now as when they were first given.

This brief exposition of Colossians and Philemon is designed to assist pastors and church members to better understand the flow of Paul's thought, the chief themes of the books and the meanings of key words and phrases. It was originally published in 1973 by Zondervan Press. Founders Press is pleased to make it available to the current generation of church leaders.

Curtis Vaughan began his teaching career at Southwestern in 1950. He has blessed thousands of pastors and missionaries through his classroom instruction. We hope through the reprinting of this volume that even more will be encouraged to joyfully and courageously follow God's Word in daily life.

CHAPTER 1

Background for the Study

Colossians, one of the shorter letters of the New Testament, has an importance and value out of all proportion to its size. But it is a difficult letter, with many obscure allusions to false teachings which are quite unfamiliar to the lay reader. Because of this Colossians is one of the relatively neglected books of the New Testament.

To enable us better to appreciate and comprehend its message it is appropriate that some consideration be given to the historical situation out of which the letter came and to which it was addressed. This we will do by looking at (1) the city, (2) the church, and (3) the epistle itself.

I. THE CITY OF COLOSSAE.

Colossae was a small town situated on the south bank of the Lycus River in the interior of the Roman province of Asia (an area included in modern Turkey). In earlier periods it had been, successively, a part of the kingdoms of Phrygia, Lydia, Persia, Greece, and Pergamum. The latter, in 133 B.C., bequeathed the region of Phrygia (which included Colossae) to Rome.

Colossae was located about a hundred miles east of Ephesus, its nearest neighbors being the cities of Laodicea (ten miles away) and Hierapolis (thirteen miles away). Both of these cities, the more important of which was Laodicea, are named in the epistle as having communities of believers (cf. 2:1; 4:13). The church at Laodicea, in fact, is mentioned as the recipient of an epistle from Paul (4:16). Colossae, though the smallest of the three in New Testament times, was older than either of the other two.

The fertile valley in which Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were located was in Paul's day a district of great wealth and had a large population. The area was probably the greatest center for the wool industry in the ancient world. Dyeing was also a significant feature of its economy.

In the ages of the Persian and Greek empires, Colossae, located on the main trade route linking Ephesus in the west and Persia in

the east, was a city of considerable importance. Both Herodotus (fifth century B.C.) and Xenophon (fourth century B.C.) bear testimony to this fact, the former calling Colossae "a great city of Phrygia" and the latter describing it as "a populous city, wealthy and large." But when the road system was later changed, Colossae's population began to diminish and eventually both Laodicea and Hierapolis surpassed it in position and wealth. Consequently, the Greek geographer Strabo, writing about two generations before Paul, could describe Colossae as "a small town." Kummel calls it "an insignificant market town" (p. 238).

In A.D. 60 or 61 Colossae, along with its neighboring cities, was devastated by an earthquake which resulted in terrible loss of life. It is somewhat surprising that Paul makes no allusion to this, for it was a calamity which profoundly impressed the whole empire and must have occurred only a short while before this epistle was written. Strabo observes that the entire district was volcanic and subject to earthquakes.

By A.D. 400 Colossae no longer existed as a city, and sometime around A.D. 700 the town was completely deserted. Its site is now but a place of ruins, the nearest town being the modern Honas.

The people who inhabited the area of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis in New Testament times fell into three groups: (1) the native Phrygians, (2) Greek colonists who came to live and trade there, and (3) Jews, the number of whom Barclay estimates to have been as high as 50,000.

II. THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE.

We have no record of the establishment of the Colossian church; indeed, Colossae is not even mentioned in Acts. All of our information about the church, therefore, must be derived from what is said in this letter. Three things may be mentioned:

1. *It was a Pauline church.* The person directly responsible for the founding of the Colossian church was not Paul but Epaphras (cf. 1:8; 2:1; 4:12, 13). The latter, however, was probably a convert of Paul and in the evangelization of Colossae was acting as a representative of the apostle (cf. 1:7, 8). The most probable date for the founding of the church is A.D. 53-55, during the time of Paul's Ephesian ministry (cf. Acts 19:10).

2. *It was a Gentile church.* There was, as stated above, a large Jewish population in the Lycus Valley, but the Colossian epistle represents the membership of the church as mainly Gentile (cf. 1:21, 27). In fact, Abbott feels "there is no hint that any of the readers were Jews" (p. xlviii).

3. *It was a troubled church.* Dangerous heresy had made an appearance in the Lycus Valley, and at the time of this letter was a serious threat to the well-being of the Colossian church. Since most of what is said in the epistle is related in some way to this false teaching, it is imperative that the reader learn as much about it as he can.

In the past, Biblical scholars have not agreed as to the identity of the "Colossian heresy." Some, for example Hort and Peake, contended that Jewish teaching could account for all of its diverse elements. Lightfoot, on the other hand, felt that it was an incipient form of Gnosticism reflecting Jewish (Essene) modifications. Others wanted to identify the heresy with the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century. There remain many unanswered questions, and much uncertainty must still be confessed, but there is considerable unanimity of opinion among present-day scholars. Indeed, Kummel observes that there are "hardly any differences in basic opinion" (p. 239).

The epistle does not give a direct account of the tenets of the Colossian heresy, and for that reason it is difficult for us to get a clear and consistent picture of it. However, from the many allusions to the heresy, we are able to sketch its leading features. Some of these are as follows:

(1) It professed to be a "philosophy" (2:8). But perhaps the word "theosophy" rather than "philosophy" more aptly describes the Colossian error. Moulton characterizes it as a "dabbling in the occult" (p. 3). Paul, refusing to recognize it as true philosophy, called it an "empty deceit" (cf. discussion of 2:8).

(2) It placed much emphasis on ritual circumcision, dietary laws, and the observance of holy days (2:11, 14, 16, 17).

(3) Affirming the mediation of various supernatural powers in the creation of the world, the work of redemption, and the whole process of salvation, the false teaching insisted that these mysterious powers be placated and worshiped (2:15, 18, 19). As a result of this, Christ was relegated to a relatively minor place in the Colossian system. "One thing," writes H. C. G. Moule, "is certain as to the 'Colossian Heresy.' It was a doctrine of God, and of salvation, which cast a cloud over the glory of Jesus Christ" (p. 9).

(4) It was decidedly ascetic (2:20-23). The errorists of Colossae taught that the body is evil and must be treated as an enemy. All of its wishes must therefore be denied and its needs cut down to the barest minimum.

(5) The advocates of this system claimed to be Christian teachers but by smooth talk and specious arguments were attempting to draw the Colossians away from the truth (cf. 2:3-10).

From these considerations we may conclude that the Colossian heresy was a syncretistic system combining three separate elements. First, the insistence on legalism, ritualism, and the observance of holy days points to a *Jewish element*. However, it seems not to have been the Pharisaic Judaism combated in Galatians. Bruce calls it a "native Phrygian variety" (p. 166), something "worse than the simple Jewish legalism" which threatened the Galatian churches (p. 168).

Second, the system's philosophical (theosophical) character, ascetic tendencies, and angelolatry point to a *pagan element*. This was probably an incipient form of Gnosticism, a very complex system which reached its zenith in the second century. As its name would indicate, Gnosticism (related to *gnosis*, knowledge) asserted the supremacy of knowledge. That is to say, the system taught that salvation is obtained not through faith, but through knowledge. The knowledge of which the gnostics spoke, however, was not knowledge acquired by study or the normal processes of learning. It was an occult knowledge, pervaded by the superstitions of astrology and magic. Moreover, it was an esoteric knowledge, open only to those who had been initiated into the mysteries of the gnostic system. It made much of catch words and the like which were to be used as one passed through the heavens, past the planets, on the way to God.

Another characteristic feature of Gnosticism was its belief in the inherent evil of all matter. In the gnostic system only that which is spiritual, nonmaterial, is of itself good. Whatever is material or physical is of itself bad. This belief led the Gnostics into many grave errors. One concerned the doctrine of creation. If the physical world is inherently evil, as the Gnostics averred, how could God, who is pure spirit, have made it? The Gnostics argued that He did not create this world, that He has absolutely no contact with it. God, they taught, put forth from Himself a series of emanations, each a little more distant from Him and each having a little less of deity. At the end of this series there is an emanation possessing enough of deity to make a world but being removed far enough from God that his creative activities could not compromise the perfect purity of God. The world, they argued, was the creation of this lesser power, who being so far removed from God was both ignorant of and hostile to Him. In the gnostic

system, therefore, the world was not viewed as God's good creation (as is taught in Gen. 1) but as a thing in itself alien to God because it is matter and not spirit.

Another error stemming from belief in the evil of matter concerned the Gnostics' approach to the Christian life. Beginning with the assumption that the body is evil, they moved in two opposite directions. Some turned to asceticism, others to licentiousness. The ascetics felt they had to free themselves from the influence of matter (the body) by inflicting punishment on their bodies. Those who gave in to license assumed an attitude of supreme indifference to things physical and material, the idea being that only the soul is important and that therefore the body may do what it pleases. Indications of both tendencies may be found in the Colossian letter, the former being opposed in 2:20ff. and the latter in 3:5ff.

Again, the gnostic belief in the inherent evil of matter led to an outright denial of the real incarnation of God in Christ. The contention of the Gnostics was that deity could not be united with a human body. They explained away the incarnation in either of two ways. Some did so by denying the actual humanity of Jesus, holding that He only seemed to be human. The body of Jesus, they taught, was an illusion, a phantom, only apparently real. Others explained away the incarnation by denying the real deity of Jesus. Both of these tendencies may be alluded to in the epistle, but the main thrust of Paul's argument appears to have been directed against those who were denying the deity of Christ.

Third, there was a *Christian element* in the Colossian error. At its heart the system was a combination of Judaism and paganism, but it wore the mask of Christianity. It did not deny Christ, but it did dethrone Him; it gave Christ a place, but not the supreme place. This Christian front made the system all the more dangerous. Error nurtured in the bosom of the church and subtly detracting from the glory of Christ always poses a graver threat to the truth than that teaching which blatantly assails His person.

III. THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

The standard commentaries and books on New Testament introduction may be consulted for detailed information relative to the critical problems of Colossians. The scope of the present work permits only a brief summary of matters which are of general interest.

1. *Its authorship.* The authenticity of Colossians was once seri-

ously questioned by many, but today there is almost unanimous agreement among Biblical scholars that Colossians is, as it purports to be (1:1; 4:18), from the hand of Paul. Evidence in support of this view comes from within the epistle and from the witness of early Christian writers. Meyer, in fact, concludes that the external testimony for Colossians is "so ancient and continuous and universal . . . that from this side a well-grounded doubt cannot be raised" (quoted by Dargan, p. 3).

One strong argument for the Pauline authorship of Colossians is its relation to the epistle to Philemon. Both of these books, sent to the same town and in all likelihood conveyed by the same messenger, contain the names of Paul, Timothy, Onesimus, Archippus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. The consensus of scholarly opinion is that Philemon is incontestably Pauline, and it is the feeling of many that the strength of its position carries over to Colossians.

2. *Its date.* Colossians was obviously written during an imprisonment of Paul (4:10, 18), but the epistle contains no indication as to the place of imprisonment. Caesarea has had its advocates, but the Caesarean hypothesis has now been largely abandoned. G. S. Duncan (*St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*) argues for Ephesus, but this view has not gained wide acceptance. One of the chief arguments against Duncan's position is that there is no certain evidence that Paul was ever a prisoner in Ephesus. Moreover, though Luke was with Paul when Colossians was written (4:14), he was not present with the apostle during the Ephesian ministry (note the absence of "we"/"us" in the Acts narrative). The traditional theory, and the one still most generally held, is that Paul was in Rome when Colossians was written. The epistle should therefore be dated about A.D. 62 or 63, during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Perhaps it was written before Ephesians, but surely not much time separated the two epistles.

3. *Its occasion and purpose.* The immediate *occasion* for the writing of Colossians was the arrival of Epaphras in Rome with disturbing news about the presence of heresy at Colossae. However, Paul's contact with Onesimus, the runaway slave whose master lived in Colossae, may have increased his interest in the Colossian church at this time.

Paul's *purpose* in writing Colossians was threefold: (1) to express his personal interest in the Colossians, (2) to warn them against reverting to their old pagan vices (cf. 3:5ff.), and (3) to refute the false teaching which was threatening the Colossian church

(see above). The last named was doubtless Paul's major concern in writing this letter.

4. *Its theme.* Each of Paul's epistles has some salient thought. For example, in Romans and Galatians the central theme is justification by faith; in Ephesians, the unity of the church as the body of Christ; in Philippians, the joy of Christian living; in Thessalonians, the doctrine of last things. Colossians proclaims the absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Robertson calls it Paul's "full-length portrait of Christ" (p. 12).

5. *Its relation to Ephesians.* Colossians and Ephesians, companion epistles, are remarkably alike. They are alike, for instance, in historical background. Both epistles were written by Paul out of an experience of imprisonment. Both were sent originally to believers in Asia. Both were entrusted to Tychicus, the messenger who was to bear them to their respective destinations (cf. Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21). Moreover, many of the topics treated are common to both (the person of Christ, the church as Christ's body, ethical duties, relationships within the family, etc.). Even the language of the two epistles is strikingly similar. Moulton points out that in Colossians the margin of the English Revised Version has 72 references to Ephesians, but only 88 to all of the other Pauline epistles. Ephesians seems to be an expansion by Paul of ideas presented in compact form in Colossians.

There are also significant differences between the epistles. There is, for instance, a difference in emphasis. Both epistles are concerned with the Lordship of Christ and the unity of His body, the church. However, in Ephesians the stress is on the *church* as the body of Christ; in Colossians the emphasis is on *Christ* as the head of the church. There is also a difference of style. Colossians is terse and abrupt; Ephesians is diffuse and flowing. Colossians is specific, concrete, and elliptical; Ephesians is abstract, didactic, and general. Finally, there is a difference of mood. Colossians, argumentative and polemical, is a "letter of discussion"; Ephesians, calm and meditative, is a "letter of reflection."

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read articles in a Bible dictionary on "Colossae," "Colossians," "Laodicea," "Hierapolis," "Asia," "Gnosticism," and the Roman imprisonment of Paul. *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* and *The New Bible Dictionary* (Eerdmans) are both useful one-volume works.

2. Find Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Ephesus on a map of the Bible world. Position these cities in relation to today's world. An excel-

lent map to help at this point is available from the National Geographic Society, entitled "Lands of the Bible Today."

3. Read Colossians in a modern translation. Watch for recurring words and phrases.

4. Read Ephesians and make note of words, teachings, and units which are like those found in Colossians.

5. Compare the closing verses of Colossians (4:7ff.) with the closing verses of Ephesians (6:21ff.).