

Colossians Intro

Colo 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

4:10 My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) 11 Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. 13 I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. 14 Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16 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. 17 Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord." 18 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Do you read inspiring books or hear inspiring taped or DVD sermons by some of the greats of the last century? I'm sure you've all read or heard stuff by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, David Watson, Billy Graham, R T Kendall and the like. Of those four I've heard three of them "live". Although their books are great, there's no substitute to hearing them as they are or were all preachers. When you've met the person you also get the feel of their written work in a different way too.

So for second generation readers, or 100th generation readers who come to read such work, we've not got that connection with the man. You lose the immediacy of the word, and in some ways you have to work a lot harder to make sure you understand what the writer was trying to say to you.

That was true of the Colossians. They had never met Paul, neither had their neighbouring church Laodicea. They had been taught by Epaphras (1:7), not Paul. They got his teaching second-hand, and they had a letter. We saw however from our second passage that even though they missed Paul, they did have the advantage of knowing some greats and perhaps not so greats – Mark, and others of Paul's travelling companions – Aristarchus (Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2, Philemon 24) from Thessalonica who we learn here is a hellenic Jew, Luke, Epaphras, whom they knew and was imprisoned with Paul and finally and sadly Demas a trusted worker who sadly deserted Paul and went to Thessalonica (2 Tim 4:10).

We are a stage harder and that's why down the centuries hundreds of tomes have been written as commentaries on the Biblical text and what we ask is: what did Paul really mean by that? The original hearers would probably have got it, as would the second handers like the Colossians.

So Colosse. Where was it. It was in Asia Minor – now Turkey. It was in the province of Phrygia, 12 miles from it's near neighbour Laodicea. The next door province was Asia and of course Ephesus was the main city there. Paul visited Ephesus but he never visited Colosse or Laodicea. He had planned to visit (he told Philemon that he intended to once he got out of prison). We don't know for sure if he ever did.

Colossians is one of a series of prison epistles – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. It was written when Paul was awaiting trial for the first time before Nero around the years 60-62. It bears many similarities to Ephesians, particularly in language, but Colossians is more targeted to issues in Colosse and theologians believe that in talking as it does of the person of Christ, that Paul was dealing with the earliest reference to the gnostic heresy and we will have a look at that in a later session. It also deals as many of Paul's letters with the error of Judaizing – the notion that Christians had to follow the Torah as Jews, which Paul repudiated.

We know from reading this letter that it was one of a pair. Colosse was sent theirs and Laodicea got their own and the idea was that they should swap letters. So unfortunately we are missing half the story perhaps? Of course we know the end for Laodicea in Revelation 3:4 *"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. 19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. 21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

Paul's Colossian letter starts with them being described as the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse. They had been established and were a faithful church. There is advice but overall it is an encouraging pastoral letter which takes us into profound truths about Christ. Whatever had happened in the intervening years is that they had become, materialistic, worldly, rather like the parable of the rich man – and they were about to get spat out!

So what do we conclude about Colosse. We'll find it full of the profound. God stuff. Enjoy the profound. I'm sure the Colossians cherished their letter. But the story of the church at Colosse encourages us to never be complacent with how God has blessed us. Demas was a most privileged person. He was a co-worker with Paul, he knew his stuff – yet he fell and deserted Paul. The Colossians within 40 years has become so hot and cold that their existence was under threat.

What went wrong – they started to love the world. The Roman Empire in this age was thriving and prosperous. Phrygia was prosperous and peaceful. And they started to love the world.

Despite our nation's present economic woes, we are a peaceful and prosperous society. We find that the church is declining. No surprise. When people can trust in their own wealth, technology, science or whatever, they start to try to do without God.

The age may have been different but the story is the same. Beware those things that will draw us away from loving Jesus and loving the world. Colossians takes us right back to basics as it tells us who Jesus is. As I've said in recent weeks; as we ask the Spirit to open our minds to understand the glory of God again, our focus will change – God will get bigger, we will get smaller and we will become more conformed to what Jesus is like.

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