

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

## Introduction: Let's Study Colossians Together

Colossians 1:1–2

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to the book of Colossians. **Let's study this book of Scripture together.**

We're going to be working through this book of the Bible verse-by-verse for the next few months. And let me begin our study by addressing an objection that some people may have to that. **A modern person in today's world approaching the book of Colossians might say, "This is a 2,000-year-old letter written by a dead Apostle to a church that doesn't even exist anymore. There's no relevance here for me. We live in a different age."**

My response to that is as follows: **"The more things change, the more they stay the same."** And there are particular ways in which this book does address our modern-day world. Because ours is an era of scientism, pragmatism, and ecumenism. And Colossians speaks to those matters. Let me flesh out each of those statements.<sup>1</sup>

Ours is an era of scientism. People turn to science more and more these days, and oftentimes that commitment is married to technology and technological advances in our day. **Supposedly something like 90% of all the scientists who have ever lived are alive today.**<sup>2</sup> We are racing towards a transhuman, A.I. enriched world of supposed techno-utopia. And yet, people are more depressed than ever. Anxiety is rampant. And there are still haunting questions that science cannot answer. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Who made us? And can we know the one who made us?

Paul to a different audience, with a different set of issues, answers those questions in the book of Colossians. "For by him [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). Science can answer a lot of questions in our day, but it can't answer the most basic questions of human existence. Where did all this come from? Who created all of this? The answer, according to Colossians, is God the Son created all things.

Ours is also an era of pragmatism. **People will say, "I don't care what's true. Give me what works. Give me something that will make me happy. Something that will make me feel fulfilled. Something that will allow me to release my inhibitions and be true to myself."** That kind of misguided pragmatism is killing people today. Because you don't find yourself by looking inward. You don't find joy by gratifying self. It's a self-defeating pursuit. The truth of the matter is that you find yourself, you find your true identity in looking to another... to the one who made you and fulfills you.

Paul says again to another audience, with a different set of issues, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (2:6–7). Paul says, "In [Christ] you have been made complete" (2:10, NASB). "[In Christ], you have been filled" (2:10, ESV). **"Knowing Christ gives stability to our lives, causing us to be thankful."**<sup>3</sup>

And by the way, Paul closes this book, Colossians, by giving us some remarkably practical instructions about how to be a good husband, how to be a good wife, how to be a good child, how to be a

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is distilled from statements made by John MacArthur in *Colossians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 1–3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

good master and servant, and how to be a good Christian. Paul addresses the pragmatic issues of life. But nobody would call Paul's approach to life "pragmatic."

Now ours is also an era of ecumenism. **In other words, "Your beliefs are your beliefs. Mine are mine. Let's not be divisive." "Can't we all get along."** Now there's a place for that in the Christian life. There's a place to yield for the sake of unity. Paul showed us that in the book of Acts.<sup>4</sup> **But there's also a time, like at the Alamo, to draw a line in the sand, and say, "Who's with me?" Or more appropriately, "Who's with Christ?"**

Paul, again addressing a different audience and a different era, says in **Colossians**, "Here's something to be divisive over. If anyone thinks less of Christ than the truth, he has no part in salvation. And if anyone tries to add something to Christ... works or asceticism or mysticism or some other such nonsense, exclude that person from the church."

Why? Because Christ and Christ alone is the head of the church. He is preeminent. And to think less of him then you should is anathema.

Ours is an age of scientism, pragmatism, and ecumenism. And to this age, Paul the Apostle, inspired by the Holy Spirit to write two-thousand years ago, speaks. **Let's listen. Let's hear from the Holy Spirit and the Apostle Paul. Let's study Colossians together.**

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And here's what we'll do today. Today, I want to answer some basic questions for you about this book of the Bible. **Today, I want to prime the pump. Today, I want to whet your appetite. Today, I want to rev our engines. So that in the weeks to follow we can go.**

So let's get after this book by answering these five introductory questions: 1) Who, 2) What, 3) When 4) Where, and 5) Why.

Write these down. These are in your notes. Let's start with the who.

1) Who wrote the book of Colossians?

The answer is the Apostle Paul along with the Holy Spirit as coauthor.

The Apostle **Paul** and the **Holy Spirit** (Col 1:1; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:21)

Now just by way of clarification, I will refer to **Colossians** sometimes as a book and sometimes as a letter. And both of those statements are correct. **Colossians** is one of the 66 books of the Bible.

But in terms of genre, it's simply a letter. It's a letter written by Paul in a real, historical correspondence with a real historical church, the church at Colossae. And it's the seventh of Paul's thirteen letters that are found in our NT—**Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians....**

And as always, this is a good time to remind everyone that the Holy Spirit is always the coauthor of Scripture. **2 Timothy 3:16** and **2 Peter 1:21** both reinforce this. The Scriptures are God-breathed. Nobody writes Scripture without the Holy Spirit's inspiration and oversight. Paul says as much himself.

Now, there is one caveat to this for the book of **Colossians**. Because you might think that Paul and Timothy wrote this book together based on **verse 1**. Look with me at **Colossians 1:1**:

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

Some have concluded by this statement that Paul and Timothy wrote the letter together. The problem with that is twofold: **(1)** Paul's the apostle. He's the one with apostolic authority. He makes that clear in **verse 1**. He's the brains and the spiritual authority behind this operation.

**(2)** And also, Paul uses first person language in this letter. Yes, he says in **verse 3**, "We always thank God for you." That's an obvious reference to Timothy and maybe some others who were with him in Rome. But in **2:1**, he says, "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face." Also he writes in **1:24**, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."

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<sup>4</sup> See Paul's actions in Acts 21:17-36. Compare and contrast those with his actions in Acts 21:1-16. For more on that see Tony Caffey, "Courage Stemming from Conviction." January 11, 2026: <https://www.messiahbible.org/acts-21-1-16-courage-stemming-from-conviction> and "Yielding for the Sake of Unity." January 18, 2026: <https://www.messiahbible.org/acts-21-1736-yielding-for-the-sake-of-unity-preserving-peace>.

So which is it? Is it “we” or is it “I”? Is Paul writing alone? Or is he writing with Timothy? The best answer to that question is that Paul is dictating to Timothy, his scribe, his amanuensis.<sup>5</sup> And Timothy is dutifully writing it down for him. The ideas and the instructions and the inspiration from the Holy Spirit are Paul’s. The actual Greek letters on the page and the penmanship are Timothy’s.

The only exception to that is the end of the letter. Look at **Colossians 4:18** for a moment. Look at the last verse in the book. There it says,

<sup>18</sup> *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*

In other words, Paul takes the pen out of Timothy’s hand after dictating this entire letter. And he writes the last verse (“this greeting”) with his own hand. His penmanship must have been noticeably different from Timothy’s! Unfortunately we have no original copy of this letter; so we cannot verify that. But we can verify that Paul and the Holy Spirit were the coauthors of this book.<sup>6</sup> Timothy was the scribe.

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### Here’s a second question we want to answer—what?

2) What was the occasion for Colossians?

Well, Paul wrote this letter to a church in the city of Colossae.<sup>7</sup> **Write this down.**

Paul wrote to the church in **Colossae** planted by **Epaphras** (Col 1:1, 1:7, 4:12)

The first part of that statement concerning Colossae is clear from **verse 2**.

<sup>2</sup> *To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Colossae was a small town in Asia Minor near the larger city of Laodicea.<sup>8</sup> At one time, Colossae was an important city with a lot of commerce. But when Paul wrote this letter, it was a has-been town. The main industry was agriculture. And the city was overshadowed by the bigger cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Ephesus.<sup>9</sup>

**But God cares about small towns. And so does Paul.** He didn’t just write letters to Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus. He also wrote this letter to this church at Colossae.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the word “church” isn’t used in **verse 2**, we know that this was a church because Paul doesn’t use “saints” and “faithful brothers” arbitrarily. He says,

*To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae*

These are the Christians at Colossae gathered as part of a church. And the book of **Philemon** suggests that they were meeting together in the house of Philemon, who was a wealthy person whom Paul had led to Christ (see **Phlm 2, 19**).<sup>11</sup>

**By the way, verse two here gives me a chance to rant a little bit about what is and what is not a saint. So I’m going to take that opportunity. If you’ve heard me rant about this before, please forgive me for doing it again. But a “saint” is not some super-spiritual person who does miracles that the Catholic church deems worthy of that title. The NT term “saint” is synonymous with the NT term believer, or**

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<sup>5</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2289: “Timothy probably served as Paul’s secretary (amanuensis) since the first person singular (“I”) is used throughout the letter.”

<sup>6</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 41: “Timothy may well have had significant involvement in the writing of the letter (as 1:1 may imply), perhaps acting as amanuensis and therefore possibly having some influence on its wording. But Paul must be seen as the real author.”

<sup>7</sup> Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 26: “An earthquake devastated the area sometime in the early 60s. We know that Laodicea was quickly rebuilt (as Tacitus suggests; and see Rev. 3:14–22, probably written in the 90s) and that Colossae eventually was rebuilt also, though we do not know how quickly. The city has been in ruins (which have never been excavated) for centuries.”

<sup>8</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Colossians Introduction: “Colossae was in Phrygia, where religion was practiced with intensity and sometimes frenzy (e.g., the famous mother-goddess cult of Cybele). There is evidence for a Jewish presence in Phrygia as early as the sixth century B.C.; this Phrygian Judaism seems to have mirrored its culture to a significant extent.”

<sup>9</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 5: “With nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis, it was part of a triad of cities in the Lycus Valley, about one hundred miles east of Ephesus.”

<sup>10</sup> Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 26: “In his classic commentary on the letter, J. B. Lightfoot claimed that ‘Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed.’”

<sup>11</sup> I think it fair to assume that Philemon got saved in Ephesus, like Epaphras, during Paul’s three-year ministry in that city.

**disciple, or Christian, or brother/sister in Christ, or child of God. So in other words, I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord. You have been "sainted," if I can use that word, by the blood of Jesus, and your faith in Christ. Not by some church! Okay? The end. Rant over.**

So Paul wrote this letter to a church in the Roman city of Colossae. And Paul wrote this letter, at least in part, because the church was dealing with false teaching and false teachers that had infiltrated the church. And Paul was informed about this by one of his apprentices, Epaphras.

Epaphras was from Colossae. Look with me at **1:5–7**, where Paul says,

*<sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup> which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup> just as you learned it [i.e., the gospel] from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf.*

There's some debate as to whether or not Paul ever went to Colossae. In **Colossians 2:1**, Paul writes, *For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,*

So Paul had never even met these Colossian "saints." Colossae was only about 100 miles from Ephesus, where Paul spent three years during his missionary travels. And these verses seem to suggest that Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae and planted that church.

Maybe Epaphras got saved in Ephesus during Paul's time there and got so excited about it, he decided to return to his hometown, 100 miles away, to preach the gospel to them. That's a likely way to reconstruct what happened.<sup>12</sup>

And now, almost a decade later, while Paul was in prison, Epaphras travels hundreds of miles away to Rome to tell Paul, **"The church in my hometown isn't doing great! They still believe. But there are troublemakers there stirring up dissension and doubt in the church. Help me, Paul!"**<sup>13</sup>

And Paul's like, **"Timothy, bring me some pen and paper. Write this down!"** And Paul writes them a letter.<sup>14</sup>

And according to **Colossians 4:7**, Paul sent Tychicus to deliver this letter.<sup>15</sup> Look at **4:7** and let's learn about Tychicus, the guy who delivered this letter to Colossae.

*<sup>7</sup> Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. <sup>8</sup> I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, <sup>9</sup> and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*

Tychicus, you might remember, was one of the "magnificent seven" that came to Jerusalem with Paul. He was one of the young guns that Paul was discipling at that time. Those seven included, "Sopater the Berean... the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus... Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus" (**Acts 20:4**). So Tychicus was from the region of Asia. He knew that world.

So if I understand what transpired correctly, Epaphras comes to Rome and tells Paul in prison, **"The church in my hometown, Colossae, isn't doing great."** Paul says to Timothy, **"Bring me some pen and paper. Write this down!"** And then Paul says to Tychicus, another one of his proteges, **"Get thee to Colossae. You know that area, Tychicus. Take this letter to them."**

Now, before we move on, let me provide one caveat to this second question—what was the occasion for **Colossians**? I told you that Paul wrote to the church in Colossae. That's true based on **1:2**. But look at this curious statement in **chapter 4** with me. Look at **Colossians 4:12**. Paul writes,

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<sup>12</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2291: "The church at Colossae was likely established during Paul's third missionary journey as he ministered for three years in Ephesus. It appears that Paul did not personally establish the church there, but instead a Colossian named Epaphras traveled to Ephesus, responded to Paul's gospel message, and returned to share the good news in Colossae."

<sup>13</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 6: "A serious heresy had arisen, and Epaphras was so concerned that he made the one thousand to thirteen hundred-mile trip to Rome to visit Paul in prison"

<sup>14</sup> Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 27: "Epaphras's reason for making this trip to visit Paul was almost certainly that he wanted to enlist the apostle's help in dealing with a dangerous yet slippery variation on the Christian gospel that had arisen in the community. Paul writes to a community, then, that he has 'grandfathered' through his 'son,' Epaphras."

<sup>15</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2289: "The letter was probably written c. A.D. 62. Paul wrote it at roughly the same time that he wrote Philemon and Ephesians. All three letters were sent with Tychicus (see Eph. 6:21) and Onesimus."

<sup>12</sup> Epaphras, who is one of you,

Like I said earlier, Epaphras is from Colossae. Tychicus is from the broader region of Asia. Epaphras is from the small town of Colossae!

<sup>12</sup> Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. <sup>13</sup> For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. <sup>14</sup> Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. <sup>15</sup> Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. <sup>16</sup> And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

So Paul sent the letter to Colossae, but his intention all along was that it be read in the nearby, larger city of Laodicea too. **And, as I might suggest, the letter of Colossians has been circulated and read in churches in other cities ever since. And it has been changing lives along the way. The Holy Spirit has given it broader impact and reach than just two cities in Asia Minor two-thousand years ago.**

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**Here's a third question we want to answer—when?**

3) When was this letter written?

**The best answer to that question is as follows:**

Approximately AD **60–62**, while Paul was imprisoned in **Rome** (Acts 28:11–31)<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that Paul writes this letter as a prisoner. He says as much in the letter itself and in **Philemon (Col 1:24; 4:3, 10, 18; Phlm 1, 9, 10, 13, 23)**.<sup>17</sup> But the timing of his writing cannot be identified more precisely than that two-year period of AD 60–62. Because the Apostle Paul was in prison for two years at the end of the book of **Acts** (see **28:30–31**). That's when he wrote this letter.

And let me just say that Paul's time in prison in Rome wasn't fun. And it wasn't easy for him. But he did have an incredible opportunity to share Christ with people during this time.<sup>18</sup> He was under house arrest, and he was unable to travel about like he normally did.<sup>19</sup> According to **Acts 28:20** he was constantly chained to a Roman soldier.<sup>20</sup> But still, he preached Christ.<sup>21</sup>

And he wrote four books of the Bible during this time. Those four books are called the “prison epistles”—**Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon**.

By the way, if you want to know quickly the chronology of Paul's writing of the 13 letters, just split them up into three groups. And you can remember that by remembering the numbers 6-4-3. There are the six books that he wrote while traveling on his missionary journeys—**Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans**. Then there are four, the four prison epistles—**Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon**. There's no way to know which of those four he wrote first or last. But he wrote them while imprisoned in Rome in **Acts 28**. And then there are three—**Titus, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy**. Those three books were written after Paul was released from prison after **Acts 28**.

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<sup>16</sup> David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 24: “Early manuscript evidence [The city ‘Rome’ appears in the subscriptions included in some manuscripts of Colossians: B<sup>c</sup> K P 82 101 122 431 460 1907 1924; cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 560] and early church fathers [e.g., Jerome, John Chrysostom, Theodoret; see Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians* (trans. Astrid B. Beck; AB 34B; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 127] provide the earliest support of this reading, and Paul's relatively lengthy Roman imprisonment with a certain freedom to minister to those around him (cf. Acts 28:30–31).”

<sup>17</sup> Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 23.

<sup>18</sup> This was his first imprisonment in Rome described in Acts 28. His later imprisonment before his death as described in 2 Timothy was different entirely. That transpired probably around AD 67 shortly before his death ordered by Emperor Nero.

<sup>19</sup> See Tony Caffey, Acts 28:17-31: “With all Boldness and Without Hindrance,” March 22, 2026: <https://www.messiahbible.org/acts-28-17-31-with-all-boldness-and-without-hindrance>

<sup>20</sup> See also Acts 28:16. R.C. Sproul says that, “There were no more blessed prison guards in the history of the world, than those [men] who had the privilege of being cuffed to the wrist of the world's greatest preacher, greatest theologian, greatest missionary, and greatest teacher.” See R. C. Sproul, “Paul at Rome (Acts 28:16–31),” sermon, Saint Andrew's Chapel (Orlando, FL), hosted on Ligonier Ministries, July 31, 2005, accessed March 19, 2026, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/paul-rome>

<sup>21</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 4: “In Colossians 4:2–4, he speaks of the opportunity he had to proclaim the gospel (cf. Eph. 6:18–20; Phil. 1:14–18).”

So 6-4-3. That's chronologically the sequence of Paul's writing ministry. And he was prolific in his time in prison in Rome. He wrote some of the most treasured Scripture in our Bible during that time. And there's correlations between for example **Colossians** and **Ephesians**. And there's correlations between especially **Colossians** and **Philemon**.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, Philemon lived in Colossae. So not only did Tychicus come and deliver Paul's letter to the Colossians, he probably also brought the letter of **Philemon** at that time. And he also brought the slave Onesimus who had run away from Philemon and gotten saved in Rome under Paul's ministry.<sup>23</sup> Awkward!

Onesimus was probably sweating bullets as the letter of **Philemon** and **Colossians** was read to the entire church that met in Philemon's house. And the entire church heard Paul say to Philemon in that letter, "**Forgive this runaway slave and welcome him as a brother.**"<sup>24</sup> That's the historical backdrop of this writing.

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**So Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome. Let me answer another question in that regard.**

4) Where is Colossae located?

**Write this down under #4.**

In **Asia Minor** near Ephesus and Laodicea (cf. Acts 19:10)

Let me show you a map of this region of Asia Minor.



**Colossae and the Surrounding Area**<sup>25</sup>

You can see on this map the more familiar and well-known cities and locations in the days of Paul. There's Corinth in modern-day Greece where Paul spent eighteen months during his second missionary journey (**Acts 18:11**). There's Troas as well, where Paul preached so long that Eutychus fell asleep, fell out the window, and fell to his death (**Acts 20:7-12**). No worries. Paul raised him from the dead. There's Ephesus too, in modern-day Turkey, where Paul spent three years during his third missionary journey (**Acts 19**; see **Acts 20:31**).

And if you go straight east from Ephesus, you come to Colossae, at a distance of just over 100 miles. And very close to Colossae was the sister town of Laodicea. The two cities were ten miles apart, and as we've seen already, Paul expected his letter to be read there too.

Now, there's no direct record in the book of **Acts** of the planting of the church in Colossae or Laodicea. But we know there were churches there. John even records a letter to Laodicea in the book of **Revelation (3:14-22)**. It was the seventh of seven churches mentioned at the beginning of the book. So how did this church get planted? And if Paul had never seen the people there, how did the church get off the ground?

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<sup>22</sup> Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 42: "Ephesus is only 120 miles from Colossae, while Philemon lives in Colossae (cf. 4:9, which refers to Philemon's slave, Onesimus, as 'one of you'). Second, both Colossians and Ephesians were entrusted to the same messenger, Tychicus, for delivery (4:7-8; Eph. 6:21-22). Third, the lists of companions from whom Paul sends greetings in Colossians and Philemon are almost identical: [Aristarchus, Epaphras, Mark, Luke, and Demas]."

<sup>23</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 4: "Rome was known as a haven for runaway slaves."

<sup>24</sup> See the Bible Project video on Colossians for a dramatic presentation on this: <https://bibleproject.com/videos/colossians/>. See also the Bible Project video on Philemon: <https://bibleproject.com/videos/philemon/>.

<sup>25</sup> Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), April 11, 2026. Some geographical points added by author.

The answer, I think, is that Colossae was planted out of the church in Ephesus. And Paul had a tangential role in planting it.

**Acts 19:10** does make allusion to this. While Paul was in Ephesus, Luke writes, “This continued for two years...” The “this” in that sentence is a reference to Paul “reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus” (**Acts 19:9**). Paul saw incredible fruit during this time. And he spent two of his three years in Ephesus doing this kind of evangelism. In fact, he kept doing it until “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” chased him out of town (see **Acts 19:21–41**).

Back to **Acts 19:10**, though. Luke writes, “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” In other words, Paul’s work in the hall of Tyrannus was so prolific that people from all over Asia came to hear him talk about the gospel. Probably one of those people from one of those towns was Epaphras from Colossae.

And this guy heard the gospel, responded in faith, and then went back to his hometown to tell others and start the church.<sup>26</sup> **So Paul didn’t mother the church in Colossae, he grand-mothered it through Epaphras.** Which is not all that unusual. That kind of thing happens when people get hold of the gospel.

And somehow, in Rome, Paul became reacquainted with Epaphras. Epaphras must have chased him down because the problems in Colossae were so bad. And that’s why Paul wrote this letter. Something Epaphras told him was so disconcerting, it propelled Paul to write.

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### Which leads us to the final question—why?

5) Why was this letter written?

**At the risk of simplifying this important book and the multifaceted message that Paul delivers in it, let me synthesize the themes of this book into three.**

### Why did Paul write Colossians? First of all.

[1] To **teach** the preeminence of Christ

**R. Kent Hughes writes in his commentary on Colossians: “When we study Paul’s epistles we see that each has a dominant theme. In Romans, it is justification by faith. In Ephesians, it is the mystery of Christ and his Church. In Philippians, it is the joy which Christ brings. In Colossians, it is the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the Head of all creation and of the Church. There is no book in the New Testament, including John’s Gospel, which presents such a comprehensive picture of the fullness of Christ.”<sup>27</sup>**

The book of **Colossians** is one of the shorter letters that Paul wrote.<sup>28</sup> It’s only about 1,500 Greek words. It’s a fraction of the size of **Romans** or **1 Corinthians**. In fact, you can read it in about twelve minutes.<sup>29</sup> **I would encourage you to do that this week. Just wake up tomorrow morning before you go to work, and read through the entire book. It won’t take long. Or you can go to YouTube and have Johnny Cash read it to you in KJV. That’s a treat.**

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<sup>26</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*,: “The church at Colossae apparently got its start during Paul’s three-year ministry in Ephesus (A.D. 52–55). During this time, a Colossian named Epaphras probably traveled to Ephesus and responded to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel (see Acts 19:10). This new believer returned to his hometown and began sharing the good news of Christ, which resulted in the birth of the Colossian church (Col. 1:7). At the time of this writing, Epaphras is with Paul in Rome and has likely shared the bad news that there was a dangerous teaching threatening the church at Colossae (4:12). Paul writes this letter to respond to this situation and to encourage these believers in their growth toward Christian maturity.”

<sup>27</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1989), 13.

<sup>28</sup> It’s eighth out of thirteen with 1,582 Greek words. The letters that are shorter are 9) 1 Thessalonians (1,481 words), 10) 2 Timothy (1,238), 11) 2 Thessalonians (823 words), 12) Titus (659 words) and 13) Philemon (335 words). See the data analysis by Jeffrey Kranz at <https://overviewbible.com/word-counts-books-of-bible/>

<sup>29</sup> Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 19: “Though challenging for casual readers, this letter makes a serious theological and practical impact on those who are willing to wrestle with its message.”

But for a short, little book, Paul packs a lot of theology into **Colossians**. And the most important contribution this book makes to theology is *christological*.<sup>30</sup> There must have been some confusion or some controversy in Colossae which Paul had to address. And I'm so glad he did address it. We are the better for it.

Because Paul wrote this. This is absolutely fantastic.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

In fact, Paul's arguments concerning Christ are so potent in this book that some liberal scholars struggle to see how he wrote this book.<sup>32</sup> I think that's silly.<sup>33</sup> This book is obviously Pauline.<sup>34</sup> And this description of Christ is nothing different from what we read in the NT elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> It's just more potent! And one of the things that Paul is going to teach us in this book is that Christ is preeminent!<sup>36</sup> Amen? **Preeminence—great title for a series!**

**Here's a second reason why Paul wrote Colossians.**

[2] To **battle** false teaching and asceticism

All of the great heresies throughout church history are guilty of one of two things: addition or subtraction. They either *subtract* something they shouldn't, or they *add* something they shouldn't.

The heresy of subtraction, we've already addressed. That's in reference to christology. They subtract something essential about Christ. Either they subtract some aspect of Christ's deity. Or they subtract some aspect of Christ's humanity. The Bible never does that. Orthodox Christian theology doesn't allow that.

**Christ is 100% man and 100% God. Full-stop. He is God in the flesh. If anyone ever tries to make less of him than that, you can quite comfortably dismiss that person as your brother and sister in Christ. They are not Christian. I don't say that flippantly. I say that convictionally. There is no Christianity without the perfect God-man Jesus Christ.**

Now the heresy of addition is a little different. That's in reference to soteriology. And it goes like this: **"Yeah, Jesus is great. Faith in Christ is awesome. But you still need something else. There's an even greater experience to be had in X, in Y, in Z... in Jesus plus some other thing."** That, my friends, is heresy. **Jesus plus nothing equals everything. It equals salvation. Solus Christus. Jesus plus something else as necessary for salvation is not Christianity. It's demonstrably unchristian and unbiblical. All you bring to your own salvation is nothing, and if you bring anything else you are disqualified.**

The most egregious form of this heresy in the NT is found in what's called "judaizing." It's a form of legalism that tries to marry Christ with good works as necessary for salvation. We see that issue in other Pauline letters like **Galatians**.

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<sup>30</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2291: "As one of the most thoroughly Christ-centered books in the Bible, Colossians finds its essential unity in the divine and exalted person of the preeminent Christ."

<sup>31</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 2: "Colossians gives us Jesus' true identity. Far from being just another religious leader, He is 'the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation' (1:15); the One in whom 'all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form' (2:9). As God in human flesh, Jesus' word is authoritatively, absolutely, and exclusively true."

<sup>32</sup> Keener, *The IVPBBCNT*, Colossians Introduction: "Given the brevity of the letter, the possible use of a scribe, similarities with undisputed Pauline letters, and the lapse of several years since his earlier letters, the differences between Colossians and the undisputed Pauline letters need not require different authors."

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed defense of Pauline authorship of Colossians, see Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 28–41. See also Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 20–23.

<sup>34</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 3: "Such leaders of the early church as Eusebius, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Irenaeus all attest to its Pauline authorship. There is no evidence that anyone doubted Colossians' authenticity before the nineteenth century."

<sup>35</sup> Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 19: "The significance of this letter to the Colossians lies in its subject matter, to which Calvin rightly points: 'this Epistle ... to express it in one word, distinguishes the true Christ from a fictitious one' [John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (trans. John Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 134]."

<sup>36</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 9: "The theme of the book can be summed up in the words of Colossians 3:11: 'Christ is all and in all.' He is God (2:9); Creator (1:16); Savior (1:20; 2:13–14); and Head of the church (1:18). It was Paul's desire in writing Colossians that we would realize that Christ has 'come to have first place in everything' (1:18)."

But there was something especially weird going on in Colossae.<sup>37</sup> There was some odd combination of Jewish mysticism and Greco-Roman proto-Gnosticism.<sup>38</sup> It's so idiosyncratic, that scholars just refer to it as the "Colossians heresy."<sup>39</sup> We'll talk all about it in the weeks ahead. But let me just give you a taste.<sup>40</sup>

Look at **Colossians 2** with me. Starting in **verse 8**.

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

What were they being taken captive by? Skip down to **verses 20**.

<sup>20</sup> If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— <sup>21</sup> "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" <sup>22</sup> (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? <sup>23</sup> These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

What in the world was going on in Colossae that made Paul have to write this?<sup>41</sup> We'll look into it. But it was something that was causing people to deviate from the sufficiency of Christ.<sup>42</sup> And Paul says, **"Don't you do that, Colossians! Don't you deviate from Christ!" Don't you do that, San Antonians at Messiah Bible Church! Don't you deviate from Christ! Don't you add to or subtract from Christ!**

**Look, we can agree to disagree on a lot of stuff here at church and still stay in fellowship with one another. You want to debate eschatology? Let's go. I've got my views on that. You want to debate tattoos, teetotalism, and divorce and remarriage, let's go. Let's talk it out and debate it congenially in the context of our fellowship of believers. We don't even agree on all that stuff as elders.**

**But we cannot agree to disagree on who Christ is and what he's done for us. That's a dealbreaker in terms of our fellowship. We cannot yield that for the sake of unity. We've got to get our Christology right! And Paul's going to help us to do that in the book of Colossians.**

**Charles Spurgeon said, "Jesus must be first, and last, and midst, and without end."<sup>43</sup>**

**And here's a third reason why Paul wrote Colossians.**

[3] To **affirm** the believer's transformation in union with Christ

**Tell me if you've heard this before, church. Colossians 3:1–3.**

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<sup>37</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2290: The best explanation for this dangerous teaching is that it comes from the context of the local Jewish and pagan folk belief. A central feature of the local folk belief was a tendency to call on angels for help and protection from evil spirits. This characteristic is well attested in many inscriptions and ancient documents. For instance, a magical stone amulet designed to be worn around the neck for protection from evil spirits reads, "Michael, Gabriel, Ouriel, Raphael, protect the one who wears this.... Flee, O hated one, Solomon pursues you."

<sup>38</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 5: "Because Colossae had a mixed Gentile and Jewish population, it is not surprising that the heresy threatening the Colossian church contained Jewish and pagan elements."

<sup>39</sup> MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 8: "The heresy threatening the Colossian church was thus a strange mixture of Greek philosophy and Jewish legalism."

<sup>40</sup> Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 25: "Since the settlement of two thousand Jewish families in Asia Minor in the third century BC (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.3.4), there was a significant Jewish population in the Lycus Valley and the surrounding areas. Significant Jewish influence in the Colossian community cannot be denied. Nevertheless, in this letter Paul appears to be addressing primarily a Gentile audience. These are the Gentile Christians who are now "to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light" (1:12). The fact that they, the Gentiles, can receive the gospel testifies to the revelation of God's mystery in this eschatological era (1:27). Unlike the Jews, these Christians are "circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands" (2:11)."

<sup>41</sup> Keener, *The IVPBBCNT*, Colossians Introduction: "That some Jewish Sibylline oracles may issue from that region and the activity of later Christian Montanists there both suggest the possibility of ecstatic elements in local Judaism (2:18)."

<sup>42</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2290: "What likely happened at Colossae is that a shaman-like figure within the church had attracted a following and was presenting himself as something of a Christian spiritual guide (cf. "his sensuous mind," 2:18). This person probably claimed to have superior insight into the spiritual realm and was advising the Colossian Christians to practice certain rites, taboos, and rituals as a means of protection from evil spirits and for deliverance from afflictions. When Paul hears of the spreading influence of this teaching that devalues Christ and fails to appreciate the new identity of believers "in Christ," he writes this letter of warning and encouragement. He does not minimize the threat presented by the demonic powers but emphasizes the supremacy of Christ over all powers. He asserts the unity of Christians with the exalted Christ, which entails their sharing in his power and authority."

<sup>43</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Master's Profession—The Disciple's Pursuit," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 31 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1885), sermon no. 1845.

<sup>1</sup> If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

**How bout this? Try this on for size. Colossians 3:5.**

<sup>5</sup> Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

**Put off the old self, if you will. Put on the new self. Colossians 3:12–14.**

<sup>12</sup> Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

**Look, when you get saved, Christian, you are a new creation in Christ Jesus. The old has gone. The new has come. And that reality has to be appropriated through the work of sanctification. You've got to put off and put on.**

**And you might ask, "How does that affect my life practically?"** Well, Paul talks about it. He talks about being a better worker. He talks about being a better husband. He talks about being a better wife. He talks about being a better child, a better servant, a better master, a better representative of Christ Jesus in our world.

**Listen, church, you're going to be a better person at the end of our study of Colossians. You will be! You're going to be a stronger Christian. You're going to be changed over the course of the next fourteen weeks, if you listen and obey God's Word.**

**You're going to be a better spouse, a better parent, a better child, a better employee, a stronger Christian. Can I encourage you to lean into that? To pray towards that? "God change me through the power of your Word." We don't just go to church to check a box! We don't just come here on Sunday because it's culturally appropriate to do so. Yuck. Gag me!**

**We come to church to worship God, to study his word, and to be changed by his power. Pray for that. Lean into that. Don't resist the Holy Spirit.**

**And pray for me in that too, so that I might be a faithful teacher of God's Word.**

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**I'll close with this. Years ago, the famous World's Fair was being held in Chicago, Illinois. It was 1893. And an astronomical number of people came to that fair, something like 27 million people. That was an amazing number in those pre-automobile days. And the population and the popularity of the city of Chicago were skyrocketing in those days.**

**And among the features of the fair was this exhibit called the "World Parliament of Religions." At this exhibit, representatives of the world's religions met to share their best points and perhaps come up with a new world religion. Good luck with that!**

**And the famous D. L. Moody saw this as a great chance for evangelism. Moody commissioned evangelists and assigned them to "preaching posts" throughout the city. He used churches and rented theaters. He even rented a circus tent to preach the Word.**

**Now, Moody's friends wanted him to attack the "Parliament of Religions." I would have been inclined to do something like that. But Moody refused. He said, "I am going to make Jesus Christ so attractive that men will turn to him." And so, that's what Moody and his team did. And thousands of people came to Christ through his ministry at the World's Fair.<sup>44</sup>**

**My goal in this series through Colossians is very simply to make much of Christ. And my prayer is that men and women will turn to him.**

**Christ is the preeminent Maker of the universe. He made every atom, every molecule, every blade of grass, every ounce of water, every tree, every hair on your head, every piece of land, every planet, every sun, every galaxy, every solar system!**

**And that Maker of everything, made himself nothing in order to save his greatest creation—humanity. He died to save those who were made in his image.**

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<sup>44</sup> Taken from Warren Wiersbe, *Be Complete* (Wheaton: Victor, 1981), 52–3. See also Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ*, 29.

**Jesus came to this earth. He was born as a baby in a barn to two teenage Jewish peasants in the humble, but significant, town of Bethlehem. And he grew up. And he taught amazing things. And he died a brutal death on a cross. And he rose from the dead three days later.**

**If there's something greater in this world and more worthy of my life and study and attention, I haven't found it yet. This is it! This is the greatest news this world has ever and will ever receive. And our faith in Christ alone saves us from our sins.**

**It's true. Believe it. Let's explore Christ together in the book of Colossians. Pray with me.**

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