

Colossians Overview

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0 : 00] So tonight we are beginning a study through the book of Colossians and we will go through the book verse by verse.

! Tonight we're only going to cover the first two verses in detail but we'll also jump to other parts of the book to get an overview. And that overview will help us see that although the letter was written several centuries ago, the church at Colossae faced the same types of issues as true churches and true believers do today.

So here's a spoiler alert for the entire book. Paul is going to show us that the answer to the issues we face is to focus on the supremacy of Christ. Regardless of the specific nature of false teachers arguments, the false teacher almost always will attack certain things about Christ or the teacher will claim that Christ plus something else is necessary for salvation.

Continuing with the spoiler alert, we can see the theme of Colossians in verse 311. And Colossians 311 says, Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

If you remember nothing else from our study in Colossians, remember the last part of verse 311. When it comes to salvation, Christ is all and in all.

[1 : 37] Even before we read the verses we're going to study tonight, we already know some things about the church at Colossae. And we learned those things during Tom's study of Philemon a few months ago.

The opening two verses of Philemon say in part, The church at Colossae is the church that meets in Philemon's house.

Let's talk about how we know that. You'll remember that Paul's purpose in writing Philemon was to get Philemon to forgive Onesimus. And Onesimus was Philemon's runaway slave.

In the letter to Colossians, we find these words in chapter 4, verses 7 through 9. They say, Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful fellow minister and fellow servant in the Lord.

I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. And with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.

[2 : 46] They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. The same Onesimus from the book of Philemon is a member of the church at Colossae. Like the letter to Philemon, Colossians is one of Paul's four prison epistles.

The other two are Ephesians and Philippians. Colossians was most likely written while Paul was in prison at Rome in the early 60s AD, probably around AD 62.

We'll cover more background as we go through tonight's verses, but let's read tonight's text now.

And that is Colossians 1, verses 1 and 2. Those verses say, We're going to break tonight's passage into four sections.

The first thing we'll see is the people. So the people goes into your blank there. The first person mentioned is Paul himself.

We know quite a bit about Paul already. Paul, of course, was the person formerly known as Saul. He was dramatically converted on the Damascus Road while on his way to continue persecuting Christians.

[4 : 07] Acts 9 gives the first account of his conversion. So to reacquaint ourselves with Paul's conversion, just listen to Acts 9, verses 1 through 16. They say, And he said, Who are you, Lord?

And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one.

Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas, look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.

For behold, he is praying. And he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight. But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard many things about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.

[5 : 45] And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. Paul took seriously his commission as the chosen instrument of Christ. And in his letter to Colossians, Paul is carrying out that commission still.

Paul identifies himself in Colossians 1.1 as an apostle of Christ by the will of God. He's an official representative of the one who sent him.

And what he writes in this letter is not merely his opinion, but it's God's authoritative word. The office of the apostle included several elements. Primarily, an apostle had to know Christ personally and have witnessed the resurrection.

Paul claimed that he had seen the risen Lord and therefore he had witnessed the resurrection.

Further, Paul's message came from divine revelation with no human intermediary. And his address to the church at Colossae came because of his apostleship and the responsibilities that it entailed.

[6 : 59] Paul says he became an apostle by the will of God. We just read the Acts 9 account of Paul's conversion for a reason, and that is to ask you this question.

How much of those events sound like they were Paul's idea? So, I think he actually knew what he was talking about when he said he became an apostle by the will of God.

The greeting also mentions Timothy, our brother. We know that Paul had a unique and special confidence in and love for Timothy. Timothy had ministered with Paul and ministered to him for many years, ever since they first met on Paul's second missionary journey.

Even though Paul was now a prisoner, Timothy was still faithful to him. And perhaps no passage expressed Paul's feelings about Timothy more clearly than Philippians 2, verses 19 through 22.

So, here are those verses in Philippians. They say, The next people mentioned are the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.

[8 : 48] And we can tell from this greeting that Paul wrote this letter to Christians. The term saints conveyed the ideas of separation and holiness expected in the Old Testament, and it also included the righteousness already imputed to these believers because of the work of Christ on their behalf.

And the parallel term faithful stressed their consistency. The church at Colossae apparently got its start during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus.

During this time, a Colossian named Epaphras probably traveled to Ephesus and responded to Paul's proclamation of the gospel. You can read about that in Acts 19.10.

And this new believer returned to his hometown and began sharing the good news of Christ, which resulted in the start of the church. Colossians 1, verses 7 and 8 say, Just as you learned it, talking about the gospel, from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.

He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Epaphras himself goes unmentioned in the greeting, but later in the letter we learn that Epaphras is with Paul in Rome.

[10 : 02] Verses 4, 12, and 13 say, 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.

For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Paul describes the Colossian believers a certain way.

How does he describe the Colossian believers there? That's right. He says they are in Christ. And this is Paul's favorite way to describe Christians.

As believers, we know that we live and move and have our being in Christ. He's the origin and source of all spiritual blessings. And the intimate personal relationship that the believers have come into with Christ Jesus accounts for everything that has been said so far.

It's because they're in Christ that they're the holy ones or the saints. And it's because they're in Christ that their faith rests. In Christ they're brothers. And these things, in other words, are real only because of Christ and because of their relationship to Christ.

[11:17] John Woodhouse personalizes the term in Christ even more. He says, You may be at paradise or in prison or at the movies in Chicago, but you're always and unchangeably in Christ.

Your geographical, earthly, physical location has no effect on your spiritual identity. But he goes on to say this too. He says, The reverse is different.

It is precisely because you are in Christ that wherever you live and work and play, you make an impact, you carry on an influence, and you make a difference. Your spiritual identity as one in Christ must control and characterize how you live wherever you live.

That's kind of a tough sentence to swallow and think about there, isn't it? When he says, Your spiritual identity as one in Christ must control and characterize how you live wherever you live.

Just as we are in Christ in a specific place today, the original readers of this letter were in Christ in a specific place. And the place is the second thing that we'll look at tonight.

[12:43] And the place, of course, is Colossae. We've already mentioned that several times. Let's talk a little bit about what we know about Colossae.

Colossae was located in the region of Phrygia in the Roman province of Asia in what is now part of Turkey. Laodicea and Hierapolis were nearby, and so Colossae made up a triad of cities in the Lycus Valley there, and it was about 100 miles east of Ephesus.

Colossae was located on the Lycus River not far from its junction with the Meander River, and that river wound around, so it actually gave us the origin of our term meandering, if you're familiar with that term.

At Colossae, the Lycus Valley narrowed down to a width of about two miles, and Mount Cadmus stood about 8,000 feet high, towering over the city.

Colossae was already a great city when the Persian king Xerxes marched through it in 481 B.C. What's the other name of Xerxes that we're familiar with?

[13:50] He is actually the Ahasuerus from Esther. So Colossae was around back in the time of Esther that Willard has been teaching us about, and Colossae was situated in the junction of the main trade routes running from Ephesus and north to Pergamos.

In Roman times, though, things changed quite a bit for Colossae because the road to Pergamos was rerouted through Laodicea, and Colossae was bypassed. That, coupled with the rise of the other two cities around it, led to the decline in the importance of Colossae.

In Paul's day, it was a small city overshadowed by its more prosperous neighbors. By the 8th century, it was largely abandoned, and then it was destroyed in the 12th century.

Archaeologists have found some remains of Colossae, but the site is currently unoccupied. We also know that the area was prone to earthquakes, and Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were devastated by one about 60 A.D., but they were quickly rebuilt.

And back in its heyday, Colossae was an important center of the wool industry. Sheep grazed on the pasture lands surrounding the towns, and dyes were made from the nearby chalk deposits.

[15:07] Colossae was predominantly Gentile, but there was a sizable Jewish community there as well. Antiochus the Great transported Jewish settlers to the region, and other Jews were drawn to the trade in wool and other business ventures there, and still others came for the mineral baths in Hierapolis.

Colossae may no longer exist, but the original audience for the letter was made up of real people in a real place. Most of those people had never met Paul, but they had heard about him.

So just imagine, if you will, a small group of believers called together, presumably to Philemon's house, with the rather exciting news that a letter had arrived from Paul, the same Paul who had taught Epaphras, their church's founder, about Jesus.

Despite the many years that have passed since the letter was first read, we're very similar to the people of Colossae in a particular way. As we go through the study in Colossians, we will be hearing a letter from a man we've never seen in the flesh, but that same man has played a significant role in our faith in Jesus too.

So far we have talked about the people and the place. The end of verse 2 has the proclamation. So the proclamation is the third section we'll cover tonight.

[16 : 34] The proclamation simply says, Because this greeting is so similar to Paul's other greetings, we can be tempted to take it for granted.

That would be a mistake to do that. Because the terms grace and peace are filled with Christian significance. Grace pointed the readers to the basis of their new life in Christ, as well as the state of grace in which they were to conduct their lives.

And peace was a prayer for the general well-being of the readers. The two are sequential. Grace precedes peace. And both comes as gifts from God, designated more personally here as our Father.

Let's dig a little deeper into what Paul means when he talks about grace and peace. There's great and glorious encouragement in the fact that Paul begins his letters by blessing his readers with the grace of God.

This reference to grace is more than a standard literary device by which letters were begun. It's a sincere prayer for the release of divine favor and power into the lives of those to whom Paul wrote.

[17 : 46] It also is significant that at the beginning of Paul's letters he says, Grace to you, while the blessings at the end say, Grace be with you. John Piper suggests that at the beginning of his letters, Paul has in mind that the letter itself is a channel of God's grace to the readers.

Grace is about to flow from God through Paul's writings to the Colossians. So here at the beginning he says, Grace to you. In other words, that is grace is now active and is about to flow from God through my inspired writing to you as you read.

So grace be with you as you read. But as the end of the letter approaches, Paul realizes that the reading is almost finished and the question arises, what becomes of the grace that's been flowing to the readers through the reading of this letter?

He answers that with the blessing at the end of every letter, which typically is grace be with you. So in other words, grace is with you as you put the letter away and leave the church, with you as you go home and deal with the difficulties of life, with you as you go to work and face the temptations of anger and dishonesty and lust, and with you as you muster courage to speak up for Christ over lunch.

We learn that grace is ready to flow to us every time we take up the inspired scriptures to read them, and we learn that grace will abide with us when we lay the Bible down and go about our daily living.

[19 : 14] This quote alludes to the fact that grace is more than an attribute of God's character. Grace has even deeper implications than that.

The grace of God, for example, is also the power of God's spirit converting the soul. It's the activity or movement of God whereby he saves and justifies the individual through faith.

Therefore, grace is not something in which we merely believe. It's something we experience as well. Listen to Romans 3.24 to talk about that grace a little bit.

Romans 3.24 says we are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Later on in Romans, verse 5.17 says, For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Grace, however, is even more than the divine act by which God initiates our spiritual life. It also is the very power by which we are sustained, nourished, and proceed through that spiritual life.

[20 : 29] The energizing and sanctifying work of the indwelling spirit is the grace of God. Think about the grace in Paul's life. After Paul had prayed three times for God to deliver him from his thorn in the flesh, he received this answer in 2 Corinthians 12.9.

That answer was, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Paul obviously derived encouragement and strength to face his daily trials by reflecting on the magnificence of God's unmerited favor.

But in the 2 Corinthians text we just read, he appears to speak more of his experience, and that experience is the reality of the dynamic nature of grace.

It's the operative power of the indwelling spirit. And that, too, is the grace of God. In other words, God's grace saved Paul, and God's continuing grace allowed Paul to make it through his daily trials.

And those same truths apply to every believer. Sam Storm says this, he says, There can be little, if any, expectation of triumphant Christian living, apart from the grace that is mediated to us and diffused throughout our hearts and minds preeminently through the scriptures.

[21 : 46] When the word by the power of the spirit is heard, embraced, and enjoyed, we are strengthened to resist the flesh and to savor the sun. Does that last sentence remind you of what Willard taught us in his Esther study?

Listen to that again. It says, As marvelous as that grace is, Paul wants his readers to know that they have even more than grace from God.

They also have peace from God. Romans 5.1 talks about having peace with God, and here is Romans 5.1. It says, Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Colossians 1.2, though, Paul talks about having peace from God. Peace with God and peace from God are related, but they're different.

Here in Colossians 1, Paul is describing a felt, tangible experience of the mind and heart. The peace that, like grace, comes from our God and Father is a confident rest in the truth that what God has promised, He will fulfill.

[23 : 04] It is that assurance and the very real sensation that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. The peace from God in Colossians 1 is a peace and joy and satisfaction in God so deep and unmovable and indelible that no amount of suffering can shake it or induce believers to take offense at God.

Paul himself was an example of someone who had that type of peace. Listen to Paul's summary of his own suffering in 2 Corinthians 11, verses 24 through 28.

He said there, Paul wrote the words we just read from Corinthians approximately six or seven years before he wrote the letter to the Colossians.

Yet in the letter to the Colossians, Paul is still faithful to God and he's still concerned for the church. So we've talked about the people, the place, and the proclamation.

If you're following along in the text, you know that we've come to the end of the verses that we're covering in detail tonight. But if you're following along in the handout, you know the outline lists one more thing we have to cover.

[24 : 55] That one thing we have left to cover is the purpose of the letter. So let's look at the purpose of the letter. Paul's purpose in writing the letter was to refute heresy.

So his purpose was to refute heresy. Despite the diligent labors of Epaphras, the Colossian church was in jeopardy.

A serious heresy had arisen, and Epaphras was so concerned that he made the 1,000 to 1,300 mile trip to Rome to visit Paul in prison. The Colossian church had not yet been infected by that heresy, and Paul writes them to warn them against its dangers.

We learn from the letter that the heresy was more than one thing. It was a combination of many things. Remember that the city of Colossae included a mixture of Jews and Gentiles.

Because of that, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that the heresy threatening the Colossians contained elements of both paganism and Judaism. The pagan culture in which the Colossian church existed worshipped many gods, including Isis, Seraphus, Helios, Demeter, and Artemis.

[26 : 11] And they were worshipped in Colossae during the Roman times. Many of the Colossian believers no doubt found the pull of the old way of life strong. So the first danger facing the church was a relapse into paganism.

Paul warns his readers of this danger, and he encourages them to stay strong in the faith. Listen to verses 21 through 23 of chapter 1. Paul says, And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he is now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I became a minister.

Then in chapter 2, Paul says this in verses 6 and 7. He says, Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Moving on to chapter 3, he talks about some of the same things again in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 3. He says, Set your mind on things that are above and not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

[27 : 40] Do we have to deal with the influences of paganism around us today? The world and the flesh exerted a strong pull on the Colossians, but an even greater threat came from Satan, who is the source of all false teaching.

And so the main thrust of Paul's letter is to counteract the effects of false doctrine. Do we have false teaching and false doctrine that we have to deal with in our society today?

Just a little bit, yes, that's true. Like we said, the Colossian heresy contained some basic elements, including false Greek philosophy and Judaistic legalism and ceremonialism.

So let's briefly look at how the letter addresses both of these. And through our quick tour of some of the additional verses in Colossians, we'll see even more how this letter applies to us today.

The Greeks loved knowledge and they prided themselves on the sophistication of their philosophical systems. They scorned the gospel message as too simplistic. To them, Jesus Christ alone was not adequate.

[28 : 48] Salvation involved Christ plus knowledge. They claimed visions that they had supposedly seen as the basis for their superior knowledge. And they believed that these alleged visions gave them deeper insights than other people into divine mysteries.

Think about the televangelists and the other cult leaders today. Many claim to have had a special vision or multiple visions from God. Other false teachers claim that we must practice asceticism, which of course is extreme self-denial or mortification, still others advocate the worship of angels. And Paul answers each of these false teachings in one verse, and that's Colossians 2.18. We'll read 2.18 and 19 together because 19 completes Paul's thought.

And they say, Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and the worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the head, talking about Christ, from whom the whole body nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with the growth that is from God.

The Colossian church faced even more heresies too. Some false teachers denied the humanity of Christ. Others denied the deity of Christ. And we see Paul address the humanity of Christ, and we'll see that when we get to verse 122.

[30 : 14] We read that earlier as part of 21 through 23, but that verse says, Christ is now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

Then in Colossians 2.9, it says, For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. The heretics also denied the sufficiency of Christ for salvation.

The verse we just read debunks that argument, as do Colossians 2, verses 3 and 4. Paul says in Colossians 2, 3 and 4, In whom, talking about Christ, are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. So as we go through the remaining verses of Colossians in more detail, we'll see even more verses where Paul emphasizes the sufficiency of Christ for salvation.

Not to be outdone by the Gentiles, though, the city's Jewish people were spreading heresies of their own. The Jews' heresies focused on keeping the dietary laws and observing holy days, Sabbaths, festivals, and the new moon.

[31 : 26] Paul tells the Colossians not to be intimidated because such ceremonialism is unnecessary for salvation. Listen to verses 16 and 17 of chapter 3, and they say, Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. And then if you drop down just a few verses to verses 20 and 21 of chapter 3, Paul says, 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?

Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to precepts and teaching. From the overview we just covered, can you see how Colossians applies to us today?

Colossians is up to date, even though it was written nearly 2,000 years ago. Its timeless message speaks to the dilemmas that faces today. To the problems and crises of our age, it presents Jesus Christ as the answer.

Today, absolutes are denied. Truth, especially religious truth, is viewed as relative. All religious traditions are assumed to be of equal value.

[32 : 56] If you claim that one religion is exclusively true, that's regarded as the height of intolerance and bigotry. In that type of religious climate, Jesus then becomes merely another wise man.

He's nothing more than a great moral teacher on a par with Moses, Muhammad, Confucius, and Buddha. Colossians, though, gives us Jesus' true identity.

Far from being just another religious leader, he is God. As God in human flesh, Jesus' word is authoritatively, absolutely, and exclusively true.

That message may be unpopular, but it's a message that people deluded by false teachers and false religions need to hear. Sharing that message may expose Christians to ridicule and other forms of persecution.

If and when that happens, we can take comfort from Paul's greeting to the Colossians because it also applies to us. We, too, have grace and peace from God our Father. If you need more comfort than that, we'll also see during the course of our study that Colossians has something to say about our destiny.

[34 : 05] The present age will not end in a nuclear or environmental disaster, but with the return of Christ in all his glory. We know that from Colossians 3, 4. It says, When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.