

Jesus our Centre (Colossians & Philemon)

Introduction and background information

The ancient city of Colossae was situated in Phrygia on the southern bank of the River Lycus, a southern tributary of the Meander, and its fertile valley produced large crops of figs and olives. It was on the main road from Ephesus and Sardis to the Euphrates. Its commercial significance was due to its wool industry. Later the city declined considerably in importance, Colossae had been surpassed by Laodicea, ten miles to the west, and Hierapolis, twelve miles to the northwest, both in the Lycus valley. These were mentioned by Paul as places where Christians were to be found with connections to those at Colossae (2:1; 4:13,15,16). So by the time Paul wrote to the Christians living at Colossae the commercial and social importance of the city was already on the wane. What effect this might have had on the Colossians, or the Christians among them, we don't know.

The three cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae belonged to the proconsular province of Asia. Colossae's population consisted mainly of indigenous Phrygian and Greek settlers. But in the early part of the second century BC, Antiochus III brought two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia and settled them in Lydia and Phrygia. So the Colossae of Paul's day seems to have been a cosmopolitan city in which differing cultural and religious elements mingled.

The Christians in Colossae, who are addressed as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ (1:2), were not converted directly through the ministry of Paul himself. This Christian community had come into existence during a period of significant missionary and evangelistic work associated with Paul's Ephesian ministry recorded in Acts 19. But Paul himself during his missionary work in Asia Minor had not reached Colossae. While the work was directed by Paul, he was assisted by several co-workers and through their ministry in various parts of the province of Asia churches were planted.

Growth Group Notes

Spring 2022



Among these churches planted in the province of Asia were the congregations at Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis. The only information we have about the beginnings of these Christian communities come from inferences in the letter, in particular the references to Epaphras (1:7,8; 4:12,13) that the congregations founded in these three cities were the fruit of his evangelistic efforts. He was a native of Colossae, described as “one of you” (4:12) through whom the Colossians had learned the truth of the gospel (1:7). He was engaged in the same struggle for the gospel as was Paul (4:13). High tributes are paid to him by Paul: he is called “our dear fellow servant” and “a faithful minister of Christ” who was Paul’s representative (“on our behalf”) in Colossae (1:7). The readers/hearers of this letter should be in no doubt that the “truth” had faithfully been taught to them by Epaphras.

Epaphras went to visit Paul and, either voluntarily or because of his arrest by the authorities, had shared in his imprisonment (Philemon 23). So he was not free to return to the congregation when Paul’s letter was sent. Instead it was entrusted to Tychicus (4:7-8) who was commissioned also to bring news of Paul’s experiences in prison. No doubt the church would also wish to hear some encouraging news about Epaphras, their leader, especially as he would not be returning with Tychicus and Onesimus (4:9). Other members of the church included Philemon and his family (Philemon 1,2) and Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus (4:9; Philemon 11).

The world of the Colossians was in many ways like ours: they lived in a time of peace in the Roman empire with a stable economy, good communications and adequate food supplies. And yet people were dissatisfied and searched for the meaning of life. They turned to the ancient Greek and Roman mystery religions seeking a profound spiritual experience that might earn them some form of afterlife. In one extreme example a Jewish lady who was both honorary ruler of the synagogue and priestess of the imperial cult! Today we might equate that to experimentation in alternative spirituality.

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The main reason for Epaphras' visit was probably to seek advice from Paul as to how to deal with the false teaching which had arisen in Colossae and which, if it was allowed to continue unchecked, could threaten the future of the church. Paul's letter, it seems, is written as a response to this urgent need. Paul warns the community not to be deceived by "fine-sounding arguments" (2:4) and to be on their guard so that no one takes them "captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ." (2:8).

Essentially the Colossians didn't know what they already had. False teachers urged them to them to add rules, ascetic practices and new philosophies to their Christian faith, so that they would have fullness of life. Paul writes to them to satisfy their desire by revealing to them that they already had fullness in Christ. In doing so, Paul gives us his strongest declaration of the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ, and the true fullness of life that he gives.

We will explore eight themes within the overarching theme of Jesus our Centre:

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| 1. Jesus our Confidence | Colossians 1:1-14 |
| 2. Jesus our Lord | Colossians 1:15-23 |
| 3. Jesus our Rock | Colossians 1:24-2:5 |
| 4. Jesus our Fullness | Colossians 2:6-23 |
| 5. Jesus our Lifestyle | Colossians 3:1-17 |
| 6. Jesus our Master | Colossians 3:18-4:1 |
| 7. Jesus our Ministry | Colossians 4:2-18 |
| 8. Jesus our Reconciler | Philemon |